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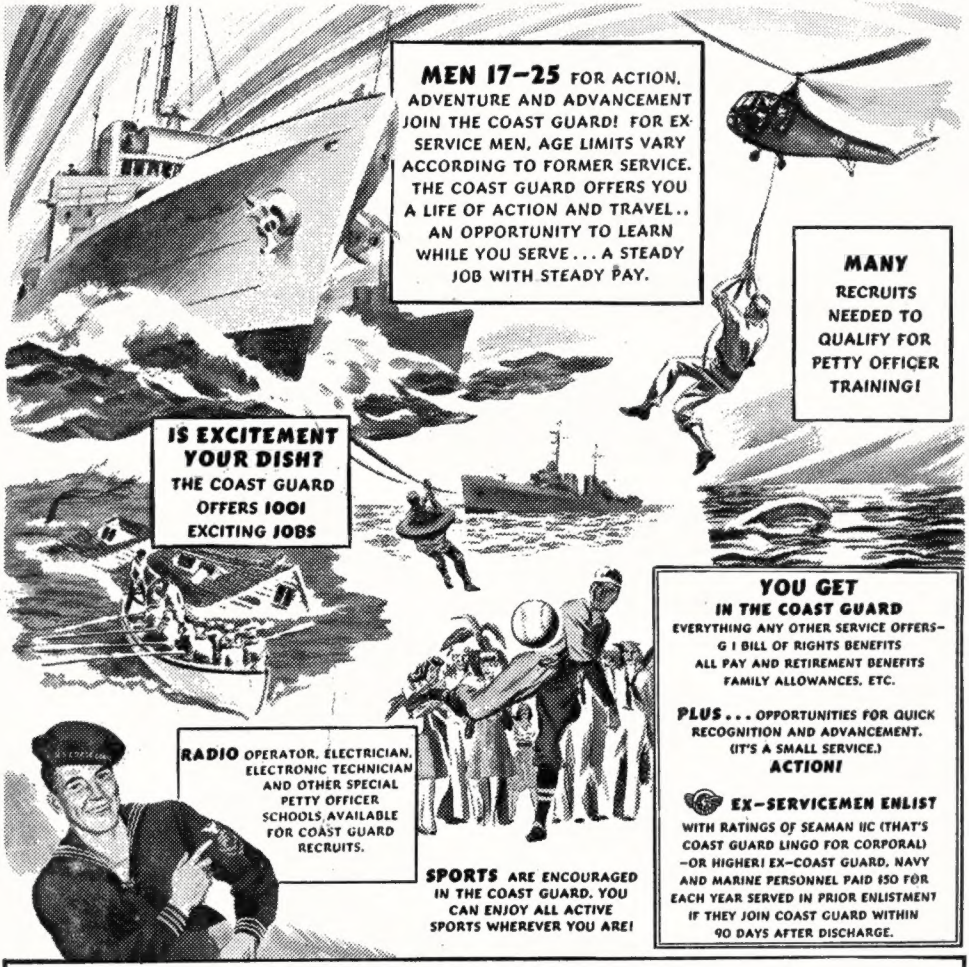

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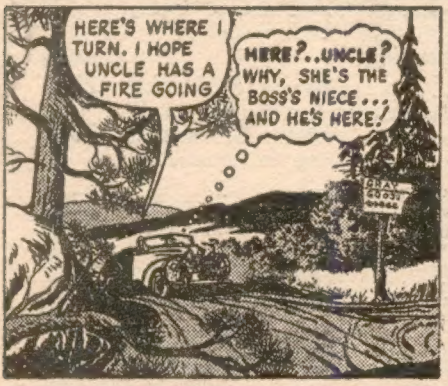

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PARDNER WANTED—BRING OWN COFFIN!

Smashing Novel of Long-Loop Cowmen

By WALT COBURN

"Lope on down here, Breen, and fetch your running iron. You'll finish this brand artist job, and from here on we'll team-tie what's left of them sleeper-marked calves."

Big Jim Caufield, who'd never done a dishonest thing in his life, had to exile himself to the bitter, twisted trails, for Big Jim figured that loyalty to a saddle-pard came first, and a man's hard-won reputation was a cheap enough price to pay to redeem a straight-shooting friend from blazing bushwhack death!

CHAPTER ONE

Hot-Lead Pardners

THE PARTNERSHIP between Jim Caufield and Dick Breen was badly bent the day that big, honest, slow-motion Jim caught his more ambitious and larceny-minded partner burning their Muleshoe Bar on another man's calf.

That bent it. The break came later, and when it came it wasn't a clean break. But Caufield and Breen were the only men, save one, who knew it. The other man was Nate Nugent and that cattle-rustling cowman couldn't afford to talk, because he was in

on the double-crossing deal to freeze out Jim Caufield.

Jim was one of those big easygoing men who believed every man on earth was honest until proved otherwise. It was his nature to be that way. Jim Caufield was rawboned and homely. His nose was too big, his mouth too wide and his skin so sunburned and peeled that it was torture to shave; so he let his moustache grow and its ends dropped down across the corners of his wide grin. He had an unruly shock of hair the color of new rope and it cowlicked on top. But set in under sun-bleached brows was a pure blue pair of eyes, puckered at the corners, a twinkle in their depths like sun shining in a cloudless sky. They were the eyes of a man who did not know the meaning of fear.

Men like Dick Breen and Nate Nugent didn't trouble to look into the eyes of big Jim Caufield. They mistook his good-natured, peaceful nature for cowardice. And they labeled his honesty part of that cowardice, holding the notion that a man was honest only because he lacked the guts to take a chance. Because cattle rustling was a dangerous game.

"The big towhead still believes in Santy Claus, Dick." Nate Nugent got Breen half drunk before he propositioned him. "He's a sucker. It'll be shootin' fish in a rain barrel."

"Mebbyso, Nate . . . mebbyso . . . But don't fool yourself about one thing. Jim Caufield is a cowman and a good 'un. It won't be long till he ketches onto us."

"And by then," said Nugent, "we'll have a tail holt on the deal. He'll have to string along with us, or sell out to you at your own figger. Me'n you can't lose."

Breen was short, thickset and tough as a boot. His hair was coarse and as straight and black as a horse's mane. On either side of a broken nose were close-set eyes that were black agate. He was swarthy skinned. Strangers mistook him for a 'breed. When they did, they had him to whip. And Dick Breen was hard to whip.

Nate Nugent was tall and slim, a range dude about his clothes. But he was a cowman and a top-hand anywhere. He had gambler blood—tinhorn gambler blood—because he was a bad loser. His cards were marked and his dice were loaded. Nugent worked the round-ups and cattle ranch bunkhouses and cow camps until he won enough money to buy a little outfit of his own. And then he built it up with a long rope and a running iron. His Double N range lapped over onto the Muleshoe Bar but it was badlands there and no specific boundary could be marked off.

Both the Muleshoe Bar and the Double N fringed on the big Flying W range. It was Flying W cattle that Nate Nugent whittled on mostly, or strays from other big outfits that sent reps to work with the Flying W round-up each spring and fall. And now Nate Nugent had talked Dick Breen into swinging a hungry loop; to break the rules and regulations and laws laid down by the Montana Livestock Association.

The day that Jim Caufield actually got proof of his partner's cattle-stealing activities that he'd heard rumored, was one of those days in May when the meadowlarks sing and the curlews make a big fuss about leading a horsebacker away from their prairie nest. The Muleshoe Bar had wintered well and Big Jimmer as the cow country called him, had ridden up out of the badlands the previous evening and across the open rolling prairie to the Flying W headquarters ranch on Wild Horse Creek to find out when their spring round-up was going to start. Big Jimmer had stayed there overnight and now as he rode along, the memory of last evening rode with him: his friendly talk with Carter McDonald, the Flying W foreman, wagon boss and general ramrod; Carter's daughter Nell who had baked him a dried apple pie with a flaky crust. He could still taste that pie, and he could still hear Nell's gay laughter as she teased him about his cowlick and his sunburnt nose.

"—and when you see that handsome Nate Nugent, wink at him for me, Jimmer. I've got my cap set for that cowboy. He's wicked as sin, Dad says, but you give him a flirting wink for me, Jimmer."

"Yeah. Wouldn't I look shore purty winkin' at that spur-jingler. 'Nell McDonald sent this.' And I squint an eye shut."

A MAN could never tell when that little red-headed Nell was teasing or if she half meant it. She had a nature that went along with her curly dark-red hair and hazel eyes. Freckles sprinkled her short straight nose, and white teeth showed when she

laughed. Her smile crinkled her eyes almost shut.

Jim Caufield was perhaps the only man in that part of the Montana cow country who never rode to the Flying W to pay court to little Nell McDonald. He figured he was too downright homely for any girl to look at.

"You build a shore handsome dried apple pie, Nell." That was as close to a pretty compliment as Big Jimmer had ever paid her.

But there was no law against a man dreaming up a lot of fancy air castles. Not even Nell McDonald guessed that he was in love with her. And so far as he could figure, nobody, especially Nell, would ever guess. But a man can ride along with his dreams on a day in early May when the meadowlarks sing and the wild roses are in bloom.

Big Jim ducked his head when he heard the snarling whine of the .30-30 bullet. Then the sharp crack of the saddle carbine threw its echoes into the broken badlands.

His big roan gelding spooked a little and shied off sideways from its running walk. Jim stood in his stirrups and from under the low-pulled brim of his old sweat-marked Stetson his sky-blue eyes squinted. He touched his horse with the spurs and kept on. This was the edge of his Muleshoe Bar range and nobody had any right to be taking a shot at him.

A second bullet kicked up the dirt ahead and ricocheted off with a hornet's whine. He kept right on. A third shot cut the air above his head. He didn't duck this time. He rode, straight-backed, in his saddle, his wide mouth pulled flat-lipped under his drooping yellow mustache. He'd glimpsed a saddled horse and recognized it as one of Dick Breen's string. He was more annoyed than angry and not at all scared when he rode up on his partner there in the scrub pines.

Breen had a big yearling heifer hogtied on the ground. A running iron was heating in its branding fire. The yearling was sleeper-marked—its ears marked in the underbit and crop earmarks that went with the Flying W iron.

Sweat beaded Dick Breen's swarthy skin and his flinty black eyes glittered redly in the sunset. His lips pulled apart in a mirthless grin.

There was no need for words. The story was told. Here was all the proof Jim Caufield needed to back up the ugly rumors he had been hearing lately. Big Jimmer wasn't a man who asked foolish questions. Breen, caught in the act, would know better than to waste any kind of a lie on his big tow-headed partner.

"I done my damndest," Dick Breen's voice was a snarl, "to turn you back."

"I ain't that easy turned." Big Jim Caufield spoke quietly.

"Well, what the hell you aim to do about it?"

"There's only one thing to do. Split our pardnership. One of us sells out to the other. At a fair price. We both know what the outfit's worth."

"You want to buy or sell?"

"Makes no never mind to me."

Big Jim Caufield was lying. It had been his ranch until the hard winter wiped him out. He'd killed off his starving cattle to save what hay he had for his saddle horses and work teams. Then this man had showed up about green-grass time, said he had money enough to buy some cattle to restock the Muleshoe Bar range. They had made a partnership deal: A half interest in the ranch for a half interest in the cattle. That was a few years ago, and they had gotten along all right because big Jim Caufield could get along with almost anybody. But it was still his home-ranch. He'd built the log cabin and barn, the cattle shed and pole corrals, and fenced his hayland and horse pasture down on the Missouri River. It was the only home he had ever known and his whole life was built there.

"I'll buy you out," Breen said flatly. "Cash on the barrelhead."

A deal was a deal. Jim Caufield wondered where his partner could possibly raise that much cash money, but he said nothing. He felt cold-bellied and sick-hearted. The warmth was gone from the May sunset. There were no more wild roses scenting the spring air.

Jim Caufield nodded his head and rode on without another word, leaving Breen standing there beside the branding fire. His running iron was heated cherry red and the sleeper-marked yearling lay hogtied.

Big Jimmer rode down through the scrub-pine timbered badlands to his ranch,

a bleak unhappy look in his sky-blue eyes.

IT WAS sometime in the middle of the night when Breen showed up at the Muleshoe Bar ranch. He had five thousand dollars in gold coins and currency, and a jug of whiskey. Nate Nugent was with him when he came into the log cabin where Jim was lying on his bunk.

Big Jimmer was bedded down for the night. He'd shed his shirt and pants and boots and was in his underwear under the tarp and soogans. But he was wide awake. He hadn't closed his eyes. He had lain there in the darkness with his regrets and fears and dismal shattered hopes.

The clump of bootheels, spurs jingling in the darkness, the strong smell of whiskey, and then Dick Breen had a match flame cupped in his hand. When he lit the lamp Jim Caufield saw the tall, slim Nate Nugent framed in the cabin doorway. There was a six-shooter in Nugent's hand.

Breen plunked down the brown jug on the table. Then the small canvas sack like banks use, bulging and heavy, thudded down on the rawhide-covered table beside the jug and the lighted lamp.

"Crawl outa the blankets, Jimmer. Dig up pen an' ink. I got 'er drawed up by a lawyer in town last week—all shaped up fer your James Caufield here on the dotted line!"

Jim slowly shoved back the tarp and soogans and red Hudson's Bay blanket. May nights were still chilled by the tail end of the long winter, but he'd been sweating in his long underwear without realizing it. He was too cold-empty-sick inside to pay attention to the sweat on his hide.

He could tell that Breen was half drunk. Ugly, quarrelsome, nasty drunk, thinly hid behind a flat grin. It showed in his bloodshot glittering black flint eyes, in the rasping flat tone of his voice.

Nugent shut the heavy plank homemade door and was leaning back against it, his fancy silver-mounted six-shooter in his hand. The gun wasn't exactly pointed at Jim Caufield but there was no mistaking its threat.

Jim swung his legs over the edge of the bunk. He pulled on his socks and pants and hooked the drooping galluses up over his bigboned shoulders. His holstered six-shooter hung by the cartridge belt from the bunk post, but he made no move to buckle it on. In his pants and boots and red flannel undershirt he bulked big: big but sort of harmless and rather comical with his homely sunburnt face and tousled cowlicked yellow hair. His grin was a little uncertain. The bleak look made his blue eyes look faded. He reached out a big hand and hefted the money sack.

"How much you got here?" he asked quietly.

"Five thousand."

"That won't buy me out. Not by half."

"I got a note signed for the balance. Payable in six months. Here. Nate's on it with me. Between us we'll ship enough beef this comin' fall to pay 'er off."

"This still ain't what my half int'rest in the Muleshoe Bar is worth."

"That," Nate Nugent spoke up now, "ain't the point. This is what you'll take. Regardless."

The fancy gun moved just a little. Its silver-mounted barrel tilted upward, glittering in the lamplight.

"An accident kin happen to any man," said Nate Nugent. He had a toneless voice. "Down here along the old Missouri River a man kin disappear and never be sighted again ner heard from—ever."

Nate Nugent had slicked-down black hair and a hawk-beaked nose. The mouth under the thin, waxed mustache was thin-lipped. His eyes were pale and cunning. He was poker-faced.

Jim Caufield was looking at Nugent's gun when he remembered what Nell McDonald had said. He grinned and winked at the man.

Nugent sort of stiffened on his long legs. A puzzled expression showed for the fraction of a second on his lean face. The fancy gun lowered.

Jim moved with the unexpected swiftness of a grizzly. He slapped the gun out of Nugent's hand and his other fist crashed into the poker face, two hundred pounds of rawboned, hard muscle behind it.

He whirled as Nugent went staggering to his knees, hit his partner twice and then kicked him hard in the belly. Breen grunted and went down gasping for wind.

Big Jim grabbed Breen by the back of his thick coarse black hair and then he had hold of Nugent. He held them apart and then slammed their heads together, using

their skulls to batter their faces. Blood spattered and they thrashed their flailing arms and kicking legs but big Jim Caufield kept slamming their heads and bloody faces together until he knocked the last of the fight out of them. Then he shoved and threw them each into a big old barroom armchair that he had furnished his cabin with. He opened the door and flung out the brown jug. He heard its earthenware crash and grinned at the sound. Then he shut the door.

Jim Caufield liked to keep his log cabin clean and neat. He eyed with distaste the blood that spattered the scrubbed pine floor.

He kicked the pearl-handled, silver-mounted six-shooter in under his partner's bunk. The grin he gave Breen and Nugent was mirthless and it matched the bleak look in his puckered blue eyes.

"A deal is a deal, Breen. It calls for cash on the barrelhead. My sellin' price is twenty-five thousand dollars. No more. No less. And I keep my own horses that I had when you bought in here. When you got that much money, fetch it here. I'll ride away from this ranch and it's all yourn. You understand?"

Breen had leaned forward with his head down to let the blood drip. Now he straightened up and his bloodshot flinty eyes glittered wickedly.

"I understand."

"Take that sack of chicken-feed with you when you go. If your purty pardner wants to crawl in under the bunk after his purty gun he kin take it along. You're messin' up my clean floor—get out. Fork your horses and don't come back, Breen, till you got twenty-five thousand cash in that sack. And you better leave Nugent behind the next time. Almost anything kin happen to a man on the river. Now git goin'."

Breen spat blood on the floor. "I own a half int'rest in this ranch. You can't run me off."

"Then stay if you've a mind to, Breen. But you'll be kinda all alone here without Nugent to back your hand. I'm almighty slow to get riled and slower yet to cool off. If I was in your boots I wouldn't take the big risk. But don't let what I got to say move you one way or another. Make 'er easy on yourself, pardner."

Breen picked up his sack of money, while Nugent crawled in under the bunk after his fancy gun. Then they went outside.

Jim stood in the cabin doorway and watched them ride away in the night. When they were a long ways gone, he came in, closed the door and barred it and went back to his bunk. This time, he slept.

CHAPTER TWO

Nate Nugent Moves In

THE FLYING W spring calf round-up was starting. Jim Caufield showed up with a string of ten horses and his bed to rep for his Muleshoe Bar iron, and to work on through with the Flying W wagon as he had been doing for a long time.

Carter McDonald, when he had the time to spare, was mighty good company. He liked to swap yarns, take a drink and play a little poker. But when he ran his round-up wagon, he was a hard taskmaster. He drove his men hard, but no harder than he worked himself, and you had to be an almighty good cowhand to get so much as a nod of approval from him. But make a mistake and that little old wagon boss would skin you alive with his sharp tongue. He had a waspish temper, but he was all cowman.

McDonald was a small man. One of those wiry, leathery, quick moving men who never tire and seem to go forever without grub or sleep. They called him the biggest little man in the Montana cow country. He made a loyal friend or a bitter enemy.

He had grizzled red hair and his eyes were gray-green. He chewed the ends of his grizzled mustache ragged. His leathery skin was etched deeply around his eyes and the corners of his mouth. His voice creaked like a rusty hinge.

"You comin' along to brand what you an' that pardner of yourn got sleeper-marked?" McDonald's eyes were green when his temper was on edge.

Jim's sunburnt face whitened a little. Two weeks ago when he had been here he and McDonald had sat around and augered as they had been doing for years. Then Jim Caulfield had told the little Flying W ramrod he'd be back in a couple of weeks on the date Carter said he'd be starting the calf round-up. On the way home Jim had caught his pardner with that sleeper-marked

yearling and had his run-in with him and Nate Nugent. Breen had returned, gotten his bedroll and his string of horses and pulled out to move in with Nugent at the Double N ranch. But he hadn't come back with the money to buy out Jim Caufield's half interest. Twenty-five thousand dollars, ready money, is hard to raise. Two weeks wasn't enough time. Breen and Nugent couldn't put up enough for security to satisfy the bank for the loan of that much cash money.

So Jim Caufield and Dick Breen were still pardners in the Muleshoe Bar outfit, both equally responsible and liable in the eyes of the law and the cow country for any mistakes. Big Jimmer hadn't had the time to go prowling through the badlands to watch what Breen and Nugent had been doing the past couple of weeks, and now it looked like Carter McDonald had caught onto something crooked Breen had been into.

"If that's how you look at it, Carter—" Jim Caufield felt like a man who has been knifed in the back by a man he called his friend.

"Brands and earmarks." Carter McDonald's voice creaked. "That's what a cowman reads. What's whittled and burnt on a critter's hide. You still own the Muleshoe Bar?"

"Me'n Dick Breen."

"And I'm still ramroddin' the Flyin' W. Them dudes that own the Flyin' W, whenever I can't run this outfit one hunderd per cent fer their int'rests, by the eternal hell they'll fire me and they'll put in a man that will. I bin ramroddin' this Flyin' W spread a long, long time. Since them Great Falls gents bought it off me and hired me to ramrod it like I still owned it. What kind of a damned snake in the grass would I be if I blindfolded myself an' let every little two bit badlands outfit in the country whittle on them Flyin' W cattle? Damn it to hell, man, while I'm ramroddin' this outfit, I'm goin' to git the job done, regardless. Anybody doin' me dirt is goin' to wish he'd bin born dead."

Little grizzled Carter McDonald turned and walked away quickly on his wiry saddle-warped legs without giving Jim a chance to say a word.

Big Jimmer stood there at the big log barn and watched the cranky little Flying W ramrod go on to the main house where he lived with his daughter Nell. She had kept house for him since his wife died—since she was fifteen. And that was about seven, eight years ago. Jim had been one of the pall-bearers at the funeral when Carter McDonald buried his wife in the little grave yonder on the knoll above the ranch buildings. Carter's wife had thought a lot of young Jim who had worked for the Flying W off and on for years until he got his own little outfit down on the river.

This was the first time Jim Caufield hadn't felt welcome here at the Flying W home ranch. He'd never needed to be asked to go on to the main house for dinner or supper where Nell set a table for herself and her father.

Jim had unloaded his tarp-covered roundup bed at the long log bunkhouse, turned his bed horse and string of saddle horses into pasture with the Flying W remuda, and then he had gone on to the big barn where Carter McDonald was.

There were reps from several big outfits, and the full crew of Flying W cowpunchers who had showed up to go to work on the calf round-up. They were at the bunkhouse now, getting washed up for supper.

Jim had intended telling Carter McDonald about his split-up with Dick Breen. But the grizzled little ramrod hadn't given him a chance to say a word. Just opened up on him without so much as a howdy, skinned Jim alive.

He'd left Big Jimmer standing alone and sort of dazed, burning with slow anger, with the hurt going deeper into his big cowpuncher heart and chilling it.

Then the front door opened before Carter McDonald got there and Jim saw Nate Nugent come out onto the front veranda with Nell McDonald. He heard Nell's gay laugh at something that range dude said and the two of them stood there for a minute. Then Nugent said something over his shoulder and came down the steps, his silver-mounted spurs jingling.

NUGENT STOPPED when he met Carter McDonald and said something. The little Flying W ramrod halted, his battered, sweatstained Stetson pulled slantways across his grizzled head. His voice was creaky, saw edged.

"Nell's bin her own boss since the day she was born. Take it up with her. Don't be wastin' my time."

McDonald walked on with his short, quick, bowlegged stride.

Nate Nugent headed for the bunkhouse with a sort of spur-jingling swagger. He was wearing a red flannel shirt and a pair of California pants. His lean handsome face bore no marks of the beating Jim Caufield had given him a couple of weeks ago, but his hawk-beaked nose had been broken by Big Jimmer's fists and it had a lump across its high bridge.

Jim walked slowly towards the bunkhouse. The cook had come outside, his floursack apron clean. He banged away on the big iron triangle that called the men to sundown supper. They came swarming hungrily out of the bunkhouse and Nugent was with them. One man on crutches with his leg and foot in a plaster cast hobbled behind them.

The man on crutches was the Flying W bronc buster. He gave Jim Caufield a wry grin.

"Busted a laig last week, Jimmer. Purty Nate Nugent taken over my rough string. He'll grandstand contest them broncs. I told the boss I'd ruther turn them broncs back into the wild bunch. . . . You shoulda bin here an hour ago when purty Nate seen Nell standin' on the front porch. He started workin' on a big bald-faced bay. The big baldy broke in half and wiped 'er up an' that purty son put up as fancy a ride as ever a gal would like to watch. Carter wasn't around to see it. But it got Mister Nate Nugent a in-vite to the big house. . . . You got a minute, Jimmer?"

"I got all year, Shorty."

"Won't take but a minute to pass it along for what's it's worth. That pardner of yourn is stayin' at the Double N ranch. And him an' Nugent is fixin' to hang that big hide of yourn on the law fence. I don't know how they're goin' about it. Mebbyso you know more about it than I do. But they're workin' at it on the sly."

"I'm obliged, Shorty."

"Keep the change, Jimmer."

The bronc rider called Shorty hobbled on into the mess house on his crutches. Jim Caufield washed his hands and face and went on in and found an empty space on one of the benches at the long table.

Carter McDonald had laid down a strict rule: no idle augering talk at the eating table. Just 'pass the salt'. Do their augering outside with their smoking tobacco. Give the cook a chance to get his table cleared.

So there was no conversation going on when Big Jimmer sat down. But Nate Nugent gave him a thin poker-faced grin and there was a challenge in his pale gray eyes.

Then Nate Nugent broke the Flying W rules about talking at the table.

"Any you forty-a-month cowhands want to learn how to own your personal iron an' git ahead in the cow business," Nate Nugent spoke to nobody in particular, "Big Jim Caufield kin show you how it's done. You take on a pardner with money enough to stock your range. Then when you're done with him you run that pardner off. Freeze him out. That's how Big Jim Caufield got rid of Dick Breen. I felt sorry for Breen and give him a job. He's holdin' down my place till I git back. Yeah—Jim Caufield savvies how to git ahead in the cow business."

Big Jimmer was sitting alongside the crippled bronc rider. He felt the cautioning nudge of the heavy plaster cast kicking his leg and kept his mouth shut.

"No augerin' at the table," said Shorty.

Every man there was eyeing Jim Caufield now. He grinned faintly as his puckered blue eyes cut a look down the length of the long table and back.

The rest of the meal was eaten in silence. Whatever harm Nate Nugent's words could do, was done. And that was that. Jim Caufield wolfed his grub and washed it down with strong black coffee. The grub had no taste and it lumped cold inside his belly. But he wasn't hurrying through his supper. He ate like a hungry man would eat good grub.

Nate Nugent was the first man to leave the table, and when Jim Caufield emptied his plate and went outside with the others, Nugent was nowhere in sight. Not then, at least.

They were all back at the bunkhouse and lazing around, some inside, others like Big Jimmer and Shorty squatted outside with their tobacco smoke, when Jim saw Nate Nugent and Nell McDonald lead their saddled horses out of the barn. Nell had on a shabby leather divided skirt and boots and

she swung up into her saddle. Nugent eased up into the middle of one of his string of broncs.

Nugent got his right stirrup—and hung a spur in the bronc's right shoulder. The bronc squealed and pitched. Nugent put up one of his fancy rodeo contest rides and when he'd ridden the buck out he reined it around by its hackamore and waited for Nell and they rode off together. Nugent said something about the bronc being as easy to set as a wooden horse on a merrygo-round and Nell laughed her gay laugh and they rode into the twilight together.

THEY HAD been gone a while when Carter McDonald showed up on his big front veranda where the morning-glory vines bloomed. He was smoking his old corncob pipe and he had a big manila envelope in his hand.

"Here's somethin' was left for you, Jim." His voice creaked. "Come an' git it." Carter McDonald sat down in one of the big rawhide chairs on the wide veranda.

The envelope was sealed. It had Jim Caufield's name written in black ink across it. Jim sat down in one of the big chairs and slit open the envelope with the big blade of his jack-knife.

Inside was a quitclaim deed to a half-interest in the Muleshoe Bar outfit, signed by Dick Breen, witnessed by Nate Nugent. With it, a promissory note for the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars, payable in one year's time from date. The date of the note was now a week old. It was unsigned, its dotted line waiting for Jim's signature.

So Dick Breen was selling out to Jim Caufield for the same price Big Jimmer had demanded. Jim knew he could never raise that much cash money in a year's time. But he had his Muleshoe Bar outfit back. He could set a match to this promissory note as easily as he could sign it. . . .

"I'd like the loan of your pen an' ink." Jim Caufield got to his feet. "And if it ain't too much bother, you kin sign for a witness on this paper."

Carter McDonald led the way into the front room. He got a pen and a bottle of ink. He said he never put his name to anything till he'd studied it. Big Jimmer nodded, and told him to study this quitclaim deed while he was at it.

Carter McDonald hesitated before he signed his name as witness to the twenty-five thousand dollar note.

"Why don't you git yourself an old dull rusty butcher knife," he creaked, "an' cut your throat?"

"I like to do things the hard way," said Jim Caufield.

"Nugent gimme that envelope sealed. He said Breen was workin' for him. That you'd run Breen off. Threatened to kill Breen, if he stayed there at the Muleshoe Bar."

"That's right."

"Nugent hinted around some about some sleeper-marked cattle the Flyin' W round-up missed on the beef round-up last fall. He said them sleeper-marked yearlin's would be fresh branded when we pick 'em up this spring when we work the badlands. He hinted how you an' Breen had locked horns about that sleeper-marked stuff."

"That's no lie."

"Mebbyso the Flyin' W round-up will gather enough to send somebody to the pen."

"That could happen."

"You own the Muleshoe Bar. You and nobody else. Nobody named Dick Breen for your pardner."

"I own the Muleshoe Bar. You seen Breen's quitclaim. I just signed that note for twenty-five thousand dollars. Witness it. Then put it and the quitclaim back in the envelope and lock it up in your safe."

"Supposin' Dick Breen shows up here an' demands that note you just signed?"

"Then hand it over to him."

Carter McDonald signed as witness, then put the note and quitclaim deed into the big brown envelope and sealed it with red sealing wax and locked it in his big safe.

"You're the biggest damn fool on earth." Carter McDonald's voice creaked dismally. "Nary a lick of sense inside that big tow-headed skull of yourn. You big sunburnt homely son! And you wonder why a girl like Nell gits plumb disgusted and cuts you into the throwbacks an' takes up with some fancy spur-jingler like Nugent!" The grizzled little Flying W ramrod snorted.

"It ain't Dick Breen that'll git the Muleshoe Bar when the Law sends you to the Deer Lodge pen. Breen will be in a grave with some gun-lead in his moulderin' carcass. Nate Nugent is playin' for keeps. And Nugent has the guts and brains to go

a long ways. And that's where he will go."

"That's about all a man kin stand, Carter." Big Jimmer's sunburnt face had whitened. "That's all I aim to take off you. You're plumb correct about Nate Nugent. Unless somebody cuts him down he'll go a long ways. Right now he's got his sights raised and he's aimin' at your ramrod job and ail that goes with it. Includin' your daughter Nell. . . . Hell, I never claimed to be anything but boneheaded. But I don't have to stand around like a big ox and git told about it. I'm cuttin' my string, right now. Your round-up will have to worry along somehow without me gittin' underfoot."

Jim Caufield let himself out the door and closed it on Carter McDonald. He saddled the first horse he came to in the barn and rode into the horse pasture.

Horses are clannish. His Muleshoe Bar string were together and not too widely scattered where they grazed. There was a big lopsided white moon rising and it shed enough light to work by.

That was what Jim Caufield had heard Nell McDonald once describe as a lovers' moon as they sat on the veranda steps. He recalled her words now and it made him sick with self-disgust because he hadn't so much as tried to hold hands with her. Now she was riding off somewhere with that lady-killer Nugent and mebbyso telling that tinhorn it was a lovers' moon. But Nugent wasn't any bashful slowpoke when it came to women. . . .

Nobody got in Jim Caufield's way when he loaded his bed on his pack horse and roped it on with a squaw-hitch. It was a good thing. Because if a man had so much as looked crosseyed at him just then, he would have been flattened out.

Carter McDonald sat on the veranda and from behind the screen of blooming morning-glory vines he watched Jim Caufield pull out with his string of horses and his packed bed horse. He made no move to stop Big Jimmer.

CHAPTER THREE

The Gunsmoke Triangle

IT WAS a one-man job. Jim Caufield tackled it like he went at everything he did, straightforward and deliberate. He seemed to be taking his time about it, but he was doing a thorough job, and getting it done as fast as a man could. He was working against time—working his and Nugent's Double N ranges, getting them cleaned up ahead of the Flying W round-up. Jim Caufield was undoing the damage Dick Breen had done with a running iron and sharp knife. And he had to make a good job of it, because it would take only one of those stolen yearlings to send him to the pen.

Jim worked out from his own home ranch. He ate a big breakfast at two in the morning and saddled a fresh horse and by daybreak he was back in the breaks with his loop built. He knew every square foot of those badlands and where to find the cattle and how to out-figure the wild 'uns. He never missed a loop, and his running iron never got cold.

Dick Breen and Nate Nugent had done right well for themselves, Jim discovered. His brand, fresh as wet paint on a signboard, was on a lot of cattle.

Jim would rope, throw and hogtie a critter, then he'd build his little branding fire, heat his running iron—vent the Muleshoe Bar and run on the Flying W. He'd tally brand it, put the tally down in the little vest pocket tally book he carried. Finally he'd turn the critter loose, stomp out the fire and ride on.

He knew that he was being watched, and he figured that the lone rider he caught sight of now and then was Dick Breen. But Breen stayed beyond gun range.

Dick Breen was no man's rank coward, but neither was he anybody's damnfool.

Before he'd started his one-man job in the badlands, Jim Caufield had tied a saddle scabbard on his saddle and filled it with a .30-30 Winchester carbine. And before daybreak he had ridden up to the Double N ranch.

Dick Breen should have been there, but he was gone when Jim arrived. So Jim found a piece of heavy wrapping paper, and used the soft lead nose of a .45 cartridge to write:

> I am working my Muleshoe Bar and the Double N range joining mine. Any man that bothers me will get hurt. Jim Caufield.

He left the note on the kitchen table, weighted down with the .45 cartridge he'd

used to pencil the warning. Then he left.

Jim Caufield had never run a bluff in his life. When he said something he meant it, every word. He was packing a saddle gun now to back it up, and Dick Breen had common horse-sense enough to keep well beyond that gun's range.

It was long, gruelling work. It was long after dark every night when Jim Caufield got back to his little ranch on the river. His horse would be leg weary, and he'd be too tired to cook himself a decent meal. He'd pull off his boots and pants and shirt and be sound asleep when his towhead hit the pillow. Up again at two in the morning, sloshing cold water on his face to get the sleep out of his eyes. In the saddle again long before daybreak and at his one-man round-up.

There was no time to shave. He grew gaunt and whiskered and grim-lipped, his eyes bloodshot and cold blue. He was working against time. . . .

Jim Caufield had worked with the Flying W wagon long enough to know about where Carter McDonald would camp from day to day, and he figured on two weeks' time before the Flying W would be camped at the head of the breaks. The wagon would camp there three days, working the badlands from there. Then Jim Caufield would throw in with the outfit, repping for his own Muleshoe Bar iron, with his tally book showing everything he had vented from his Muleshoe Bar, branded Flying W, and added a tally mistake-brand to.

It was a week to do a clean job on his own range. Then he rode over in the early dawn onto the Double N badlands range, and before sunrise he had caught his first freshly-branded Muleshoe Bar yearling with the sleeper-earmarks changed from the Flying W underbit and crop to Jim Caufield's double crop. He had the fresh Muleshoe Bar vented and was running on the Flying W brand when he heard his name hollered out. He looked up quickly and sighted Dick Breen.

Breen sat his horse on a bare ridge a few hundred yards away. There was a white silk neckerchief tied to the end of the barrel of his saddle carbine and Breen was holding it up for a flag of truce.

"You wouldn't shoot a man out from under the white flag, Jimmer!"

"What's on your mind, Breen?" Jim Caufield picked up his saddle gun from the ground beside the hogtied yearling, and he raised the hind sight to its last notch.

"Me'n you's got to have a medicine talk, Jim!"

"Commence talkin', Breen. If you figger it'll do you any good."

"You're over on Nugent's range."

"I'm mistake-brandin' everything you an' Nugent run my Muleshoe Bar on. And that's regardless of any man's boundary line."

"Nugent gimme orders to keep you off his range."

"I hope you commence right now to carry out them orders!"

"Keep your shirt on, Jim. Nugent gimme the dirty end of it. He's bin playin' me for a sucker. I'm sick an' weary of his tinhorn deal. I'm ready to quit his game. Me'n you—"

"Me'n you is quits, Breen."

"Don't be so damn tough on a man that was your pardner, Jimmer! Nugent ribbed me into it. I was drunk that night—" Breen's voice had a snarling whine to it. Wheedling—but vicious. . . .

"You're drunk now, Breen. You bin drunk for the past week."

"How'd you figger that out?"

"I know you that well."

"But you don't know the half of it, Jimmer. Nugent gimme orders to shoot you when you got over here on his range."

"Then take that white flag off and use that gun fer what it's intended."

"I don't want to kill you, Jimmer."

"Then ride away from it, Breen."

"I can't! Nugent's got me acrost the barrel. He kin send me to the pen for cattle rustlin'. I told you he ribbed me into it. Now he's double-crossin' me. He's got me by the short hairs."

"On account of them sleeper-marked calves you weaned off their Flyin' W mammie's last fall?"

"Yeah. There's a box canyon—fenced off. Some of them Flyin' W cows kep' a-comin' back a-bawlin' for their calves. Hell of a bawlin' racket they made. So I shot a few cows. Them cows' dead carcasses showed up this spring when the snow melted in the canyon where the weanin' pens is. Brands a-showin' the big Flyin' W on their hides. Nugent's got me where he wants me—damn his fancy hide, the black-

leg tinhorn son! He's really got me now!"

"Throw away your cryin' towel, Breen. What else has Nugent got on you?"

"You signed that promissory note for twenty-five thousand bucks. You'd orter know. You read who it was made out to."

SOME of big Jim Caufield's self-assurance left him. He had signed that note without reading it too carefully. It had been drawn up by some shyster lawyer in town, and it was full of double-barreled legal terms—nothing a self-educated cowhand could savvy.

"It's made out to Dick Breen." Jim's voice lacked conviction.

He heard Breen's laugh: harsh, ugly.

"It's made out to Dick Breen *and* Nate Nugent! Can't you read?"

That was what Carter McDonald had meant when he'd said he never signed anything until he'd read it over. And then he'd lit into Jim Caufield and said Jim didn't have a lick of sense inside his tow-headed skull. . . .

"Lope on down here, Breen, and fetch your runnin' iron. You'll finish this brand artist job, and from here on we'll team-tie what's left of them sleeper-marked calves."

Jim Caufield stood spread-legged, his saddle carbine covering his former partner, while Dick Breen rode down off the bald ridge.

Breen did not see the man on horseback over on another badlands ridge, half hidden in the scrub piñes. But Jim Caufield saw the horse and rider, and he figured it was Nate Nugent. From now on this job was going to be dangerous.

Dick Breen was half-drunk. His black agate eyes were bloodshot and red as coals in the sunrise. He undid the dirty white neckerchief from the end of his carbine barrel and knotted it loosely around his bull neck. He offered Jim Caufield a drink from the quart bottle he had shoved in the deep pocket of his chaps, but he wasn't offended when Big Jimmer shook his head.

Big Jimmer Caufield squatted on his hunkers with his gun and let Dick Breen finish the job. When the yearling was turned loose and the little fire blotted out with dirt, Jim marked it down in his tally book and mounted his horse.

Then he pointed out the horseback on the far ridge.

"Nugent packs field glasses." Breen's voice was a low snarl. "That's him and he's bin a-watchin' everything that went on here. There's only one thing to do. We got to kill off Nate Nugent. Right now."

"If that's how you feel about it, go ahead. Ride up there and kill him."

"Nugent's bushed up. He'd knock us both outa the saddle. Hell, I ain't that drunk I'd tackle Nugent in the wide open."

"It was your idea."

"Not till the sign is right. Then we'll tackle him together. From the brush. Only a half-witted fool would give a gunslinger like Nate a chance for his taw."

"You'll do your bushwhackin' all on your own, Breen."

"Dammit, you thick-skulled ox, you want him to git you first?"

"If I have to kill Nugent, I'll give him a fightin' chance. And the next time you call me anything but Mister, I'm apt to knock your ears down. We're wastin' time. You know where to locate the rest of this stuff. Lead the way. And bear one thing in mind. I don't trust you, Breen. Any wrong move you make, I'll beat you to it, and you'll wake up in hell. Git goin'."

Big Jim Caufield knew what he was up against and it wasn't good. Dick Breen and his white flag—then Nate Nugent showing up yonder.

"If you and your side-pardner Nugent has any signals fixed between you, Breen, you better send him word right now that if he tries anything that looks bad to me, I'm goin' to bust your spine with a bullet."

He watched Breen's swarthy skin lose its color and turn yellow; saw the flinty black eyes shift uneasily like the eyes of a trapped animal.

"I told you I got a bellyful of Nugent's fancy ways. I'm gone with Nate Nugent!"

"Mebbyso. But most mebby you're still playin' his hand. If I had any sense I'd just pull a trigger now and cut down the odds. But I just ain't got the build for that kinda work. So I'll take you along to do the brandin', and I'll try to figger out some scheme to ketch yonder Nugent before he ketches me. And no matter which of us you throw in with you're apt to stop some gun lead. If you're playin' both ends agin' the middle, Breen, you're doin' one hell of a clumsy job of it. Now let's ketch us some livestock."

CHAPTER FOUR

Showdown at the Double N

THEY WORKED out from the Double N ranch, and for a week the hours were from the crack of dawn until it was too dark to read a brand. At the end of that week they had the Double N range worked clean, and they rode back to the Double N ranch from the last day's roping and branding.

Since that morning when Breen had showed up with the white flag, Jim Caufield had not sighted Nugent or cut his sign anywhere. He figured that Nugent had satisfied himself that Breen had thrown in with Jim Caufield, and then he'd ridden back to the Flying W round-up.

Working with a man who might shoot you in the back or knife you while you slept wasn't pleasant, but big Jim Caufield had survived it. He'd driven Dick Breen like a slave driver, and kept him always under the threat of a gun.

Jim Caufield hadn't troubled to disarm Breen. And that had its effect on the man. "Whenever you feel lucky, Breen, reach for a gun. It'll gimme the only excuse I need to git shed of your company."

Breen had run out of booze. His nerves were saw-edged and he was jumpy and ugly-tempered, and he kept watching for a chance, but Big Jimmer never turned his back on him. At night he bedded down a ways off and told Breen that if he heard or saw him move around in the night he was going to shoot first and then ask questions. He had Breen sleeping inside Nugent's log cabin. Breen never knew where Jim was bedding down for the night.

Now Jim rode with Breen back to the Double N ranch in the moonlight, keeping Breen ahead of him, his right hand never far from his gun. Their horses were leg-weary. Both men were bearded and gaunt and empty-bellied.

They stabled their horses and went on to the cabin. There was enough moonlight to target a man out in the open, but black shadows fringed the clearing. Jim told Breen at the barn that the sign looked right for a killing.

Breen had been edgy all day: watching the skyline, missing easy loops when he roped, clumsy with his running iron. He was nervous as some wild animal sensing danger; spooky.

Now he dug up a quart bottle of booze from an empty manger. He seemed as if he had been holding it out, saving it for when he'd need the rotgut to thaw out the chill of fear inside him. He pulled the cork in the dark. The neck of the bottle rattled against his teeth and the booze gurgled as he gulped it down raw like a thirsty man drinking water.

Then he corked the bottle and led the way across the clearing from the barn to the log cabin. Jim Caufield was a step behind him, a six-shooter in his big hand.

The cabin door was shut. Breen lifted the latch and kicked the door inward and it creaked on its hinges. The cabin was pitch dark inside.

Jim Caufield's gun poked Breen's husky back. "Light the lamp."

Dick Breen struck a match and held the flame cupped in his left hand, his right hand on his gun. The match flame threw a flickering light. The cabin was empty. Breen let out his breath noisily. He stepped over to the table, lifted the lamp chimney and held the last of the match flame to the wick.

Big Jim stepped inside, shut the door and slid the wooden bar across it. He saw the hard glitter of Breen's opaque black eyes in the lamplight; saw the beads of cold sweat on the swarthy skin above the wiry black beard. Breen's head was cocked a little sideways like he was listening for something—expecting it, dreading it, yet hoping for it to happen. . . .

Then big Jim Caufield knew he had gotten too careless. He'd walked into the trap and barred himself in. He knew it then, even before he heard the sound of Nugent's toneless voice outside in the night.

NATE NUGENT was crouched against the black-shadowed log cabin. He had been hidden there since nightfall, flattened on the ground at the windowless log wall. He had removed the daubing and chinking from between the logs, and the barrel of his gun shoved through the slitted opening.

Jim Caufield saw the end of the gun-barrel. Then he heard the flat-toned voice of Nate Nugent. It sounded his death warning.

"You're a dumb jackass, Caufield."

Big Jim's six-shooter was pointed at Dick Breen's belly, the hammer thumbed back. His teeth were bared in a yellow-whiskered grin, and his eyes were as cold as blue ice.

"No argument about it, Nugent." Jim Caufield spoke quietly. "You better talk fast, Breen."

Breen's skin was a jaundiced yellow above the black whiskers. His voice creaked. "Go easy, Nate. The big son has me covered. He'll kill me. Don't crowd him, Nate. He'll gut-shoot me!"

"That'll save me the bother."

Breen had his bottle of whiskey. He pulled the cork with his teeth and spat it out and drank.

"I left you a note, Nate!"

"I got it. You said you'd have Jim Caufield penned here in the cabin. Right here in the lamplight like you got him—all set and ready for me to shoot him down. You did the job like I told you, Breen. And you've got those sleeper-marked yearlin's all mistake-branded, so when I take over the Muleshoe Bar it'll be a clean herd. . . . You've done a thorough job of it, Breen, and I've got no kick coming. I'm actually proud of you, Breen. . . ."

"Then keep this slimy skunk from shootin' me!"

"You got the job done, Breen. You're no good to me. You'd only be underfoot.

"I'll have the Muleshoe Bar and the Double N. It won't be long till I'm ramroddin' the Flyin' W, because before this round-up is over old Carter McDonald is goin' to meet up with a sad accident. He'll git killed by a horse. Drug to death. . . . I'll marry Nell an' I'll ramrod the Flyin' W. I'll run that outfit into the hole and them Great Falls white-collared dude owners will be plenty glad to unload it at any figger I put on it. So you'd be underfoot, Breen."

Big Jim Caufield grinned mirthlessly. "I said you was doin' a clumsy job of it, Breen."

"Gut-shoot him, Caufield, while you're still on your feet. I ain't got all night."

Breen's face was sweat-beaded. His flinty black eyes glittered. He took a long pull at the bottle. Then, with a quick overhand throw, he used the bottle to smash the lamp on the table.

Jim Caufield threw himself sideways. Nugent's gun spat fire and the bullet grazed Caufield's ribs. The cabin was plunged into darkness now. Nugent's gun, poked through the opening between the logs, kept spitting jets of flame. And inside the pitch-dark cabin Breen's six-shooter was roaring and spewing fire.

Jim Caufield crouched near the closed door, holding his fire. The gun-roar blotted out the sound he made when he slid back the heavy wooden bar and lifted the latch.

Breen was drunk enough now to be dangerous, and the darkness gave him back his nerve. He was no longer under any man's gun. He was in the dark and his gun was in his hand and he had his fighting chance, and he took it. He was going to kill Jim Caufield. Then he'd kill Nate Nugent. Then he'd kill Carter McDonald and he'd marry Nell McDonald, just as Nugent planned it for himself.

He roared it and snarled it and he punctuated it with the six-shooter that filled the log cabin with its wild explosions. And then his gun snapped empty. And that was what Big Jim Caufield was waiting for.

Jim pulled open the door and was outside and the door pulled shut again before Breen could eject the six empty shells from his gun and re-load in the darkness.

Nugent had taken a shot at Jim Caufield's crouched bulk as he went out. The bullet had ripped a shallow furrow along the outside of big Jim's thigh. He felt the burning rip and then he had the door closed.

He crouched outside in the black shadow of the cabin, nerves taut, muscles tensed, listening.

Then from the brush beyond the clearing came the sound of Carter McDonald's creaky, brittle voice.

"Throw away your guns, Nugent! Walk out into the open with your hands up! Old Man McDonald has bought into the game!"

That wasn't how big Jim Caufield wanted it.

"Stand your hand, Carter."

"That you, Jimmer?"

"Yeah."

"Then sit to it!"

Big Jim Caufield was crouched low. He had his six-shooter cocked. He slipped along the outside wall of the cabin and around the corner. He took each step cautiously. He wanted the first shot, because that first shot might mean the difference between life and death. He was easing

along in the black shadow when he heard the creak of the door hinges. He could hear Breen moving. Breen was half-drunk and careless about the noise he made. And then ahead of Jim and around the corner he heard Nugent move. And he knew he was caught between the two men.

JIM CAUFIELD moved fast. It made no difference now if he made a racket, but he'd taken off his spurs at the barn and Carter McDonald over yonder in the brush was shouting something and his creaky voice covered the sound of Jim Caufield's running.

"Dammitall, Jimmer!" Carter McDonald's voice sounded shrill as a cricket's noise in the night. "There's three of you a-dodging in the shadder of that cabin an' how the hell kin a man tell which is you and which 'uns ain't you! Wave a hat an I'll know yuh!"

Jim Caufield had no time to take off his hat and wave it, even if he had heard and understood. He heard the little old Flying W ramrod's voice shouting meaningless words. He had a man to kill. . . .

Big Jim rounded the rear corner of the log cabin, just as Breen's six-shooter roared. The bullet missed his back by inches.

Then he caught sight of Nugent. Nate Nugent must have done some fast thinking. He had been slipping along in the shadow of the cabin, headed towards where Jim was coming. He might have heard the sound of big Jim running. Because now he was playing it like a game of tag. He'd turned and headed back and around the other way. Nugent's back was turned and he was going away from Jim when Jim sighted him. Another few steps and Nugent would be around the corner of the cabin.

"Stand your ground, tinhorn!"

Nugent whirled, the silver-mounted six-shooter in his hand spitting fire.

Big Jim Caufield ducked as the bullet whined close to his head. He pulled the trigger. He wasn't aiming. He just pointed his six-shooter at Nugent's belly and pulled the trigger. His .45 slug hit Nugent in the belly and Nugent staggered and sort of doubled up and Jim thumbed back his gun hammer and pulled the trigger again and he hit with his second shot and Nugent went down staggering like a drunken man falling.

Nugent kept on shooting as his legs gave way. He had his fancy gun gripped in both hands now and he was thumbing the gun hammer and squeezing the trigger and his shots came fast, but they were going wild. And then Nugent was down on his belly and he kept on shooting. Blood came from his open mouth and choked him and he coughed and the blood spewed out and then the cough rattled in his throat and his head lobbed over sideways and he jerked once and then lay on his back with his pale eyes wide and the blood trickling from his gaping mouth. Nate Nugent had gambled for his high stakes and lost. Nate Nugent was dead. . . .

Jim Caufield heard a noise behind him and whirled around. He saw Dick Breen's short bulk lurch around the corner of the cabin. The gun in Breen's hand spat once. The bullet plowed dirt between Jim's widespread feet.

Jim thumbed his gun and pulled the trigger. No flame spat from his gun-muzzle. There was no noise on the exploding cartridge. He had emptied his gun into Nate Nugent.

But Dick Breen had been shot, even as he fired the shot that kicked the dirt between Jim's legs. And it was a gut shot. It staggered Breen and he reeled sideways, and then another bullet struck him in the chest and tore through his ribs and ripped his heart to shreds. Breen stumbled and pitched forward onto his face and he was dead when he crashed heavily to the ground.

It was little old Carter McDonald who had fired the two shots that killed Dick Breen. The Flying W ramrod stood out there in the moonlit clearing, a saddle carbine gripped in his gnarled hands. He levered an empty .30-30 shell from his saddle gun. From under the low-pulled brim of his battered old hat his eyes were as green as splinters of bottle glass.

"I had hell," he creaked, "a-tellin' who from which. That damn' Breen thing was the one waved a hat. How bad you hit, Jimmer?"

"I bin stung worse by a yellowjacket hornet."

"I got orders to fetch you to the home ranch all in one big chunk. For a while there, I calculated I'd fall down on the job.

Tell me how in the name of hell kin a man be that thick-skulled to just set his own trap an' then walk into it!"

Carter McDonald was cussing and sputtering and chewing the ends of his ragged mustache—trying to cover up anything that Jim Caufield might mistake for softness, and fooling nobody but himself.

"That Nugent—fooled nobody. Shorty bustin' a laig gimme a good excuse to turn over the rough string to Nugent. Let him make his grandstand play fer Nell. She had no trouble gittin' Nugent to brag about what he aimed to do. Takes a female to trip up a lady-killer like Nugent. He told it shore scary when she taken that moonlight ride with him. Then she raced him back and left him behind and if he figgered he had my daughter Nell on the run then that was his mistake and none of hers. And what Nugent told her Nell passed along to me. I watched that spur jingler, and there wasn't a move he made I didn't foller."

"Then you could have cut Nugent down tonight before me'n Breen got here."

"Shore thing. And you'd never have had no use fer me after. Nugent was your big bear meat, Jimmer. It was you or him. All I done was take that Breen thing off your back."

The changed horses at the round-up camp. Carter McDonald turned the outfit over to one of his top cowhands and told him to run it till Jim Caufield showed up.

"Big Jimmer'll be your new wagon boss," he said. "I got all I kin tend to at the home ranch."

Jim Caufield handed the man his tally book and told him about the mistake-branded yearlings they'd pick up on circle.

"Quit wastin' time, Jimmer," creaked Carter McDonald. "We know all about that much-branded livestock. Me'n you is headed fer the home ranch."

Jim Caufield wanted to shave and get the cook to cut his hair and then stop at his Muleshoe Bar ranch for a bath and change of clothes. But Carter McDonald told him there was clothes Jim had left at the Flying W ranch.

"Nell will have one of them dried apple pies cooked and waitin' for you. Thinkin' the way to a man's heart is through his empty belly . . . She's wasted a hell of a lot of dried apples and pie crust on you so far. If you ain't got the nerve, I'll prod you into it with a six-shooter."

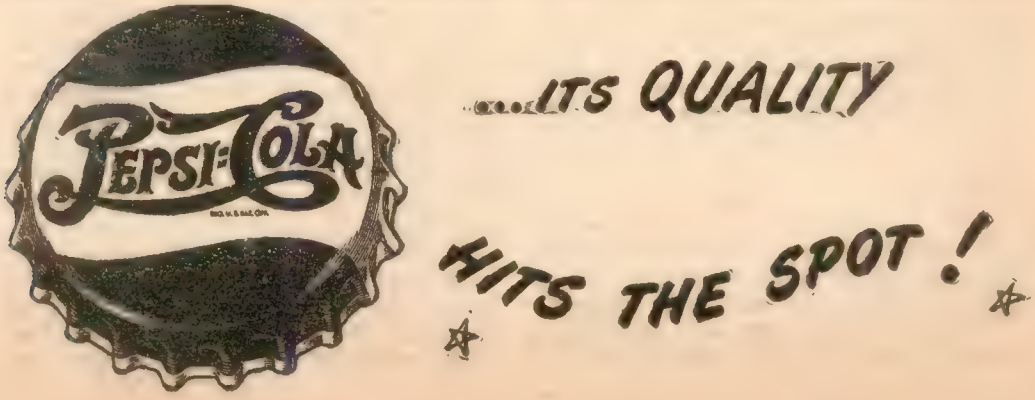
Big Jim Caufield said he might take Carter up on that.

But when Nell met them at the door Carter McDonald ducked back and before he ducked he gave big Jim Caufield a hard shove that sent him staggering, and then he had Nell in his arms and it was all over and it was a long while later that he asked her to marry him. She said he'd have to be blind and deaf and dumb to not know the answer.

They were married there at the ranch. Carter McDonald opened his big safe and took out the sealed envelope. The quit-claim deed was in it, but there was no promissory note for twenty-five thousand dollars.

"Provin' the hand is quicker than the eye," creaked Carter McDonald. "I sleight of handed it. Burnt it! Somebody had to keep you from throwin' your Muleshoe Bar away. Well, it's Nell's job now!"

THE END



Lafe's knee slammed into Thad's chest. Thad felt his hold on the gun barrel dissolve as he slumped.

By HAROLD R. STOAKES

CAN'T KEEP A DEAD MAN DOWN

There was Thad Collins, in a coffin with the lid nailed down. He was still alive—but if he didn't get out fast, he knew his makeshift house would be far too permanent for comfort.

THADDEUS COLLINS had hung his linsey shirt on the bushes that edged the clearing. The old London fusil was close at hand, too, loaded with buckshot and leaning against a tree—ready for trouble if trouble came calling. Thad was stripped to the waist, with his buckskin britches thonged tight about his middle, as he turned the crank on the shot barrel.

The sun felt warm and healing on his skinny arms and back, but the way the light slanted across the thatched roof of the log cabin up the slope, Thad knew it was about time to get his nakedness covered.

Rhoda Anderson, the new schoolmarm, would come driving along the gloomy trail in less than a half-hour. A man whose skin shriveled down so tight against his ribs that it danged near showed the shape of his innards didn't want a woman like Rhoda looking at him—and pitying him maybe.

Thad spun the handle of the shot barrel quickly, so that the small round pellets of lead inside tumbled one over the other, grinding themselves smooth. He didn't hear the creak of the rig along the grassy trail until the shadow of it fell across the clearing.

"I reckon that shot is polished enough," Lafe Saylor said. "I'll take it along. It's more mine than yores. Me and Pond Rossiter worked these lead diggin's a long time before you and yore brother come

along." His voice rasped like metal.

Thad glanced up in confusion. Lafe Saylor sized up things with a quick blink of his small eyes and landed hard on the heels of his Monroe boots. Before Thad could turn, Lafe moved around and blocked his way to the London fusil. Then Lafe rocked back on his heels, grinning, with the sunlight reddening the bristly hairs on his neck.

Thad wet his lips. Lafe Saylor was big-muscled and drum-jawed. His eyes were the dirty grey of slag lead, shadowed now under the broad brim of a slouch hat. His hip gun was pulled loosely around toward the front.

Anger at the thinness of his own arms and wrists stung Thad.

"There's no part of the lead mine that belongs to you," Thad said hotly. "You and Pand walked off and quit. You were too lazy to dig deep enough and find the lead that was waiting for you."

"A man's got a right to change his mind," Lafe drewled.

Thad glanced jerkily around. "Asaph licked you both and settled it weeks ago," he said.

"Maybe Asaph won't be so lucky next time," Lafe grunted. "Maybe me and Pond have been waitin' until there was something worth fightin' over."

Thad was conscious of the gloominess of the thickets and that the sun slanted inches lower across the thatched cabin as Lafe backed slowly toward the London fusil. Lafe balanced the butt of the long-barreled musket against his palm and hurled it into the bushes. It crashed dismally, somewhere back in the thicket.

Thad glanced hopefully up the slope. Asaph should be somewhere around. Further up the slope, perhaps, feeding oak logs into the double-eyed smelting furnace. Or down at the shot tower by the creek, bucketing out unpolished shot to bring up to the shot barrel. Lafe Saylor seemed to sense his thoughts.

"I wouldn't do no yellin'," Lafe said. He grinned. "Not unless yuh want a little private blood-lettin'. Way I hear it, the settlement doc has let plenty of blood out of yore skinny carcass to ease the pleurisy pains."

Thad bit his lips hard. A yell probably wouldn't do much good. Asaph would be too far away to get there in time. Besides there was no telling where Pond Rossiter might be hiding. Lafe and Pond usually stuck close together.

But he had to do something. Thad waited until Lafe slung the shot barrel onto his shoulder and moved toward the wagon. Then, doubling low, he hurled himself at Lafe's post-round legs.

The shot barrel skinned along Thad's back, slamming pain through his body. Lafe cursed and clawed for his gun, as they crashed against the wagon. Thad's fingers closed desperately over the gun barrel.

"Asaph!" Thad's voice broke high on the scream.

"Coming!"

The booming roll of Asaph's voice came from behind the cabin. Thad heard the hard thump of Asaph's boots. Swinging on his knees, he clung to the gun-barrel as Lafe lurched away from the wagon.

Momentarily he saw Asaph running along the edge of the clearing. Fear tightened the chords of Thad's neck.

Pond Rossiter had come up from the creek! Hidden behind the thickness of the bushes, he held a huge stone above his head, waiting to crash it into Asaph's brain.

"Asaph!" Thad screamed again.

He saw his brother's head jerk around. The stone spun past Asaph's shoulder. Asaph's freckled fist smashed into Pond's whittle-pointed jaw.

Still on his knees, Thad heard Lafe's grated curse. Lafe's knee slammed into Thad's chest. Thad felt his hold on the gun barrel dissolve as he slumped. He was barely conscious of Asaph's bigness as his brother crashed over him.

When Thad sat up, Asaph was holding Lafe's gun is his big hand. There was a long gash along the side of Asaph's face, but there was a larger purplish mass of welted flesh on Lafe's cheek. Lafe and Pond had both climbed onto the seat of the wagon. Pond held his jaw and moaned softly.

"Next time you come looking for trouble, you'll find it in a coffin," Asaph said grimly.

Asaph stood straddle-legged and big—anger seeming to make him inches taller than he was. Lafe Saylor licked his tongue around his lips. Lafe's slag grey eyes were

hard and they stared right at Thad's.

"I reckon we'll take that chance," Lafe said. "No one's goin' to take our lead diggin's and make it stick."

THAD HUNTED out the old London fusil in the thickets after they had gone. The bushes scratched his arms and shoulders and left trickles of blood across his chest as he stepped back into the clearing. Asaph hoisted the shot barrel onto his shoulder.

"Dreaming again," Asaph said bitterly.

Thad glanced down at the gun. There wasn't any way of explaining that Lafe had driven up while he was thinking about Rhoda Anderson, and gotten between him and the gun. Asaph had a right to his bitterness. Even a skinny-ribbed man should have been able to move quicker.

"You think they'll come back again?" Thad asked.

"They'll come back again and again now that we've got the lead mined and the shot made." Asaph paused significantly. "That's why I gave you the gun." He teetered the shot barrel on his shoulder. "I'll take this up to the cabin and bring some more for you to churn from the shot tower. Better get that blood and dirt washed off your hide."

A copperhead slithered out from the rocks and skimmed across the brown water of the creek as Thad kneeled and scooped water up along his arms. He was washed, but not yet dried enough to pull on the linsey shirt, when he heard Asaph's yell from the base of the shot tower.

Thad stumbled through the brambles that edged the creek. Asaph was white-faced. His big fingers clutched at his arm. The sieve bucket that he used for dipping lay at his feet.

"Copperheads," Asaph said throatily. "Two of them bit me at once. They're in the shot well."

Between the grip of Asaph's round fingers, Thad could see the fang marks of the copperheads. He looked over the rim of the huge oaken-staved tub. The tub was filled to the waterline with chilled shot. The snakes were coiled near the side.

Thad pictured it quickly. Asaph had been looking away as he dipped the sieve-bottomed bucket into the tub. The snakes had struck without warning. Thad looked back at the high straightness of the oaken staves. Copperheads couldn't have gotten into the tub unless someone had put them there. Lafe and Pond had probably been watching the clearing, knowing that Asaph would come to the shot tub.

There was no time for putting it into words. Thad glanced at his brother.

"Get up to the cabin," he said. "I'll fetch along one of the snakes that bit you."

He killed the copperheads with rocks brought from the creek and dragged one on a stick all the way to the cabin door, before he saw the high-sprawled shadow of Rhoda Anderson's rig against the logs.

Asaph was on a chair just inside the door, breathing hard. Rhoda was on her knees beside him. Thad hunkered down.

"It's going to be all right," he said quickly. "I got one of the snakes that bit him."

Thad slipped a knife from his pocket. He saw the puzzled look in Rhoda's eyes.

"What ever in the world for?" she questioned.

Rhoda was full-bosomed in calico, with a curve to her waist, and a round redness to her lips that made a person itch to kiss her—except for the soberness in her eyes that stopped a man short and made him realize that there would be a heap of seriousness behind any kisses that Rhoda Anderson gave.

"Best thing for snake bites," Thad said. He worked quickly with the knife. "Cut up the snake that done the biting. Slit open the chunks and put the innards meat against the wound to draw out the poison."

"Witchcraft!" Rhoda said contemptuously.

Thad's mouth gaped open. He saw the small knife in Rhoda's hand. She slit a thin line along Asaph's arm.

"You ain't going to blood-let him?" Thad gasped.

"Only way to get the poison out."

"Pleurisy's the only thing cured by blood-letting," Thad said doubtfully.

He hesitated. Rhoda had been a Civil War nurse before she came to the Missouri country. She didn't seem to think much of backwoods ways. Probably she didn't think much of backwoods people, either.

"Blood-letting for pleurisy," she said caustically. "Brimstone and hog's lard for

the itch. Slippery elm bark for gunshot wounds. More Missouri men die for want of good sense than t'other reasons."

Thad glanced helplessly at Asaph. A man couldn't lay hands on a woman and stop her.

"I reckon Rhoda knows best," Asaph said between his teeth.

Rhoda bent low over Asaph's arm, sucking the poison out and spitting it on the floor. Between times she spoke hurriedly.

"Spoon whisky into him" she said.

Thad worked numbly. By the time Rhoda was through, Asaph's head lolled, and Thad could tell he was nigh dead drunk.

"He's going to die," Thad said dully.

"Fiddlesticks, he's going to live," Rhoda said. "Heat some water and we'll fix those scratches on your chest."

Busy as he had been, Thad hadn't had time to think about himself. Now he remembered that the linsey shirt was still down by the creek where he had dropped it. Rhoda looked oddly at his thin ribs. Color climbed into his face. He stumbled toward the door, avoiding Rhoda's eyes.

"I reckon I'll be all right," he mumbled. "With Asaph sick, there's work to be done."

DOWN at the base of the shot tower, Thad looked gloomily across the hickory-lined creek. He hadn't meant for any woman to ever see him like that—least of all Rhoda Anderson. There was something in her eyes that always made him turn away, sick inside that he wasn't more of a man and able to say the words that pounded crazily in his head.

It wasn't easy to explain the way he felt after the settlement doc got through draining the blood out of him to ease the pleurisy pains that wracked his chest. Sometimes the sun just seemed to slam right down underfoot, dizzily, while the whole world spun. It seemed he just kept getting weaker and skinnier until he had to hang onto a hickory limb to stay on his feet and keep turning the shot-barrel handle.

But the settlement doctor said he was getting better. Thad hoped that it was true. He had started growing big—after the fashion of Asaph—before the pleurisy pains started. Maybe when they were cured he would fill out again, and he could speak the things to Rhoda that were in his mind.

Thad dipped the chilled shot out of the tub and carried it up to the shot barrel, finishing the job that Asaph had started. His eyes tightened with worry. Asaph would be sick a long time—and tomorrow Lafe Saylor and Pond Rossiter would come back again . . . .

Thad turned the handle of the shot barrel slowly. There was a mess of slag in the double-eyed furnace up the hill. It would take nearly two weeks to smelt it out proper. But there was the chilled shot that he and Asaph had spent weeks in making. Lafe and Pond would be after it.

Thad grimaced. He wouldn't stand much chance of stopping the both of them. *Next time you'll find trouble in a coffin,* Asaph had said, but Lafe and Pond wouldn't need to worry about that now.

The thought turned slowly. Thad relaxed his hold on the shot-barrel handle. Maybe a coffin *would* be the answer to things, if he handled it just right.

It was late when Thad finished polishing the rest of the shot, so that it was ready for market. He went around to the stable in back of the cabin and hitched the mare to the high-wheeled box wagon.

The moon was silvering the sky when he drew up in front of the coffin-maker's shop in the settlement. Thad roused the old man from the back of his shop.

"I want to buy a coffin," Thad said.

"Who be it for?" the old man queried.

"Asaph." Thad swallowed. "Copperheads bit him. He died quick. I'll be bringing him in before morning."

The coffin-maker shook his head.

"Need a big one," he said. "Asaph was a big man."

Thad helped push the pine box up in back of the wagon. Top boards jiggled.

"Jest pounded a couple of nails to hold 'em in place," the coffin maker said. "You'll be wanting to fix the top down proper when you get him to town."

THAD DROVE slowly back along the trail toward the lead mine. Coffin-maker would spread the word that Asaph had died. Lafe and Pond would feel safe in taking their time.

Thad half-grinned. Low-hung hickory branches brushed the sides of the wagon. In the meantime, he could fill the coffin with shot and haul it into market as though

it were Asaph's dead body. By the time the slag was smelted out and there was anything for Lafe and Pond to claim without working for it, Asaph might be well again.

The thin rawhide thong that belted his britches dug into his stomach. Thad loosened it. He drove along the thicket-lined trail to within a half-mile of the mine clearing. Where the trail curved, he felt a jolt.

Lafe Saylor dropped heavily onto the seat beside him. Thad jerked sideways while the reins cut across his palms, but Lafe's slab-muscled arm closed around him, pinioning his arms. Lafe's drum jaw and slag grey eyes were so close that Thad could feel the scrape of his whiskers.

"I don't know what yo're hankering to do with that coffin," Lafe said. "but Asaph ain't dead. Me and Pond rid ahead of yuh. He's sittin' up there big as life with that fancy schoolmarm looking after him."

In the moonlight Thad saw that Pond Rossiter had brought his horse alongside the wagon. The horse was lathered from hard riding.

"What you aimin' to do with the coffin?" Lafe grated.

The crush of Lafe's arm almost seemed to bend Thad's ribs. Anger spumed.

"I ain't sayin'," he said grimly.

Moonlight silvered the front of the wagon. Thad felt the brush of Lafe's boots against the side of his own. Raising his foot he slammed the heel down hard on Lafe's toes.

Lafe yowled and loosened his hold. Thad tried to drive his skinny elbow into Lafe's side. Then a gun-butt grazed the side of his head. He fell back over the seat and lay half-dazed alongside the coffin.

"Skin-an'-bones wildcat," Lafe snarled. "Better tie him up and get that load of shot while Asaph's sick."

Thad tried to twist out of the wagon box, but Pond's leveled gun halted him.

"Maybe we should stuff him in his own coffin," Pond said, grinning. "Give him time for coolin' off."

"Good idee, Pond." Lafe grinned, too.

Pond's gun dug into Thad's side as Lafe tumbled the coffin into the grass along the side of the trail. Lafe swore as he tore the top boards free.

"Ain't but a couple of nails in each board," Lafe said. "Man gets to kickin', he'll break free quick."

"They'll hold if yuh take the reins off his horse and tie them around the ends of the box," Pond drawled. "Mebbe he kin buck the boards up some, but the straps will hold."

Low-hung hickory branches whipped Thad's back as he bent double in the coffin with Pond's gun in his side. Flat in the coffin he saw Pond shove one of the boards into place. Pond slammed the nails down with his gun butt. There were two of the boards. The second one was shoved into place, sealing the coffin.

"Better leave some air space between 'em," Lafe drawled. "Not enough so's he can get a finger through to tamper with them straps, but enough so's he kin breathe. We might want to let him out some day."

Thad felt the jostling of the coffin as the straps were slipped under it. Then silence settled.

Flat on his back, Thad swore softly, hopelessly. Moonlight stretched a thin line down through the crevice between the boards, broken only by the darkness of the straps. One of the straps was almost over his head, but Lafe had taken his knife, along with everything else from his pockets.

Hours passed, while the branches soughed across the top of the coffin. Thad rolled to his side. The knotted ends of the rawhide thong about his britches dug into his hip. He turned back, loosening the ends of the thin leather. It was smooth against his hand. He fingered it gingerly. It was smaller than the crevice overhead.

Thad pushed the thong up past the leather strap, playing it through his fingers until half of it lay on top of the casket. Thad jiggled the slender rawhide carefully until the free end of it slipped down through the crack.

Wrapping both ends of the thong about his hands, he pulled downward. The harness strapping strained against the box. Thad lay back, panting. It was possible to get the strap partway through the crevice, but not far enough so he could chew it. He pulled down again, straining hard with one hand. He was just able to squeeze enough of his fingernail up so that it scraped against the leather.

Holding tight to keep the strap from slipping back, Thad dug at the leather. The

tip of his finger rubbed raw against the edges of the crack. Blood began to ooze from it. Gradually he felt pieces of the leather flake off until there was a crack in one side of the strap. He pulled harder and felt the strain of the thong widen the crack. Finally the strap broke.

Thad lay back panting. Minutes later he bucked the loosely-nailed boards from the top. The moon had shifted in the heavens, and the night wind was colder along the trail.

THE PLEURISY pains returned, strong and aching, as he hurried toward the clearing. There was no telling what Lafe and Pond had done to Asaph—and Rhoda.

There was candlelight from the cabin doorway. Thad skirted it cautiously. Through a window he could see Lafe Saylor, sitting hump-backed near the fireplace. Rhoda sat across the room, white-faced, with her hands folded in her lap. Asaph lay on the bunk, awake but helpless.

There was noise down by the shot barrel. Thad moved silently among the bushes along the edge of the clearing. In the fading moonlight he could see the outline of Lafe's wagon. Pond Rossiter was loading polished shot into oaken tubs in the wagon box.

Thad watched as Pond moved back and forth, carrying buckets of shot to the wagon. It had taken a long time to smelt the lead, and shape, chill and polish the shot. It was all he and Asaph had to show for weeks of work. Thad inched closer until he was only a few feet from the wagon. As Pond turned his back, heading up the slope, Thad raised and dug his fingers into the tubs, filling his hands with the small round pellets.

His boot scraped against the wheel. Pond swung around, dropping the buckets. Moonlight whitened the butt of Pond's holstered gun. Thad swung his arms, flinging the shot at Pond's head.

"My eyes!" Pond screamed. Momentarily Pond's hands darted upward, covering his face.

Thad leaped forward and drove his fist into Pond's chest. With his other hand he grasped the butt of the revolver, dragging it from the holster.

There was a bellow from up the slope. Thad saw Lafe Saylor's big frame outlined against the light of the door. Pond Rossiter continued to stumble blindly around the clearing. Thad hunkered down under the protective shadow of the wagon. The smooth butt of Pond's gun felt cold but reassuring in his hand.

Lafe thundered down the slope. Lafe's gun was drawn as he reached Pond.

"Drop that gun, Lafe," Thad said levelly.

Lafe spun, trying to search the shadows with his gaze.

"You—" He cursed hollowly.

"Next time you put a man in a coffin, make sure he's ready to stay there," Thad said.

"Next time you will be!"

Lafe brought his gun around quickly, following the sound of Thad's voice. Flame spurted. Thad felt the tug of Lafe's bullet along the edge of his buckskin britches. His own gun blasted. In the moonlight Lafe staggered half around, bent double. Thad triggered again and saw Lafe slump to the ground, dead.

Then there was a threshing in the thickets. Thad dragged himself from under the wagon just in time to see Pond Rossiter disappear.

The pleurisy pains slammed back at him again as Thad stumbled up the slope. Asaph was in the doorway with the old London fusil, looking a bit weak, but on his feet.

"Guess I'm a mite late," Asaph said.

Thad looked at him. A man that was double snake-bit should have been dead by now. Asaph glanced over his shoulder, grinning.

"I reckon Rhoda had the right cure," Asaph said.

Thad felt a twist of pain along his back and sat down hard on a chair.

"Get yourself shot?" Asaph asked.

Thad shook his head. "The pleurisy."

Rhoda moved toward the fireplace.

"Just get that shirt off your back," she said. "I'll fix some hot packs."

Thad could feel Asaph's grinning gaze.

"I'll see the settlement doc in the morning," he said. "Maybe a little more bloodletting will fix it." His voice sagged.

Rhoda whirled. "So that's what the doctor has been doing. No wonder you're

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He heard the startled crack of a rifle behind him. . . .

Snake River's Range-Hog Medicine

By WILBUR S. PEACOCK

Snake River Jim felt that he had earned his rest. . . .Yet, like an old war-horse at the smell of gunsmoke, he knew the urge to fleece still another sucker. . . .And who could ask for a better one than that razor-sharp land-hog—provided Jim was still able to dodge snarling lead slugs?

LIKELY, it was because Snake River Jim was bored, that he paid little heed to Martin Lambert and his son who even now were filling barrels with water from his well. With the title to eighty acres of land and with eight head of cattle roaming his range, Snake River no longer felt any surge of peace. His medicine wagon gathered dust, and his fingers had lost their skill with cards. He felt a desire

to match wits again with somebody, wanted to winnow the grain from some sucker's overladen wallet.

It was unfortunate, of course, that the Lambert's stream had disappeared, but then, in this country of sink-holes, water had the habit of springing from nowhere, running for yards or miles, and then vanishing into another hole, maybe never to reappear. Honeycombed as the land was beneath the surface, water came and went in devilish patterns. Only Seth Torker, who had the biggest spread in the country, was truly lucky; his stream never faltered, winter or summer.

Snake River Jim nodded slowly, thankful his water came from a well which tapped an underground stream. Unlike Martin Lambert, he did not have to depend on the vagaries of nature. He watched Martin Lambert finish filling his barrels, and he smiled a bit as young Bob Lambert came up.

"Dad says to thank you," young Lambert said.

"Tell him he's welcome."

"He says to tell you he'd like to get water each day, since Seth Torker's dammed the stream."

"Dammed the—!" Snake River came upright in his chair. "What are you talking about?"

Bob Lambert dug his toe into the dirt, shame and anger mirrored on his face. "He dammed the stream," he explained. "He and dad had a fight, when Dad wouldn't sell out. Next day, the dam was put up, and now there isn't any water on our land." He scowled bleakly. "We've got two dry beds now, one where the old river was and the other where the stream went dead."

"Come on, Bob!" Martin Lambert yelled.

"But—" Snake River began, and then went silent, watching the boy race back to the heavy-laden wagon. He waved automatically at the man and boy and then sank back in his cane-bottomed chair.

It was a brutal situation young Lambert had disclosed. Snake River had seen such things throughout the West. Big spreads ate little spreads, and watered land was the motivation. Too, Seth Torker had a vicious reputation. He owned the Rocking W, and his hired hands handled guns better than ropes. With the connivance of the sheriff, who was his brother-in-law, Torker could, and did, get away with murder.

And now, Snake River knew, if Torker planned to grab Martin Lambert's land, there was little that could be done. No rancher could survive without water, and no single man could stand up to Seth Torker's gunnies. It was a good situation for an outsider to steer clear of.

And yet, glowing like hidden embers in a white-ash fire, resentment spread through him. Torker was a threat to him, too, for he was alone on his tiny spread, hardly a fit opponent for a bunch of drygulchers.

Snake River grunted in ill-humor and tossed away the butt of his stogie. As he watched Lambert's wagon disappear over the rise, sympathy touched his eyes. Then slow amusement came to his face. He'd been wanting action, and now was the time for it. Maybe nothing would happen, but at least he'd be doing something.

He whistled shrilly on his fingers, grinning as his team lifted startled heads two hundred yards away.

"C'mere, Maude, you old devil," he shouted. "We've got a patch of riding to do."

* * * *

The rig creaked. Like Snake River Jim, it had seen better days, although the harness was fresh and supple, and new paint was bright over old scars. Maude walked sleepily, the first burst of exuberance already exhausted.

Snake River pulled up at the main house of the Rocking W. Looking back, he could see the new lake created by the dam. It was small now, but it would grow. It seemed incredible that so much water could be on the Rocking W, for there were countless stories telling of its worthlessness until the faulty earth had shifted. Then a huge artesian spring had vanished on the land which was now Lambert's, and had come up on the Rocking W. Only the fact that the stream had gone across the Rocking W and onto Lambert's land had saved the smaller ranch from extinction.

Now, looking at the dam Seth Torker had erected, Snake River felt a surge of anger, and his eyes were cold as they swung to face the grey-templed man who had come onto the ranch house porch.

"Light and rest for a spell, Snake

River," Seth Torker suggested cordially.

"Thanks," the old showman said, and pulled Maude into the shade of a spreading cottonwood. He climbed down the wheel and paced toward the porch.

They sat in comfortable chairs, neither speaking for the moment. Snake River had met Torker once before, casually, and now, seeing him again, he wasn't impressed. Seth Torker affected Eastern clothes and manners, and neither fitted him. His face was hard, his eyes glass cold, and the arrogance of his head was like that of a snake.

"Wine?" Torker asked, and Snake River nodded.

He took the glass, his snake skin vest creaking, rattlesnake rattles burring where they served as buttons. His belt was snake skin, his hat a tall-crowned Stetson. His boots were black and hand-stitched. His mustaches flared in piratical sweeps, and his white hair hung almost to his shoulders. He dominated the other man, and amusement lay in his eyes at the rancher's obvious resentment of the fact.

"Nice place you've got here, Torker," he said. "Makes my eighty acres look sort of scrubby."

Torker smiled. "I like it," he said.

His voice was soft and friendly, striving for a culture not natural to its timbre of words. As a youth, he had been handsome; but now the first sagging of fat was layering his cheeks. He still wore the bruises of his fight with Lambert. He flushed as Snake River noticed them.

"That's quite a lake you've got," Snake River commented. "Seems sort of strange, damming up the stream."

Seth Torker twisted his glass. "May need the water," he said, "if the river pulls another vanishing act."

"Must be hard on Lambert, cutting off his water like that," Snake River observed carelessly, "seeing as how that's the only stream on his land."

Torker shrugged. "Too bad," he admitted, "but I've got to look out for myself. After all, the water starts on my land, and I've got a big investment here. Without water, the Rocking W wouldn't be worth ten cents an acre."

"I suppose not," Snake River Jim agreed lazily.

He finished the wine, nodding agreeably. He enjoyed this fencing with Torker, insignificant as the duelling was.

"I've been thinking," Torker said. "I've been thinking of expanding. How about selling out to me?"

"Same terms you gave young Lambert?"

Snake River's tone was so mild and genial the words had no sting for a moment. Then the rancher flushed, anger stirring in his eyes.

"Same terms?"

"Sure!" Snake River laid his glass aside. "First, beat me up, and then—" He grinned. "—Build a dam around my well!"

Seth Torker inspected his nails. "Lambert some special friends of yours, by any chance?"

"Not until today."

Torker smiled thinly. "A man shouldn't be hasty about choosing his friends."

Snake River stood. "You mean the choice between him and a skunk like you? You couldn't pay me enough to be your friend."

Torker caught at the arms of his chair, then subsided. "As soon as Lambert sells to me," he said clearly, "I'll ride over your way with a bill of sale for your property."

Snake River grinned. "Bring your men," he said. "You'll need help." He towered over Torker, his friendly eyes suddenly cold and contemptuous. "Bring your men," he said again and turned away.

He was smiling to himself as he pulled Maude into the path which led to the main road. He'd stirred up a hornet's nest, and he had no way of knowing who would get stung. He had no plans, he admitted cheerfully, but he did have patience. And he knew one thing: get a man mad and he'd lose the advantage.

He whistled softly and shook out the reins.

MARTIN LAMBERT'S home was cheerful. There were even curtains at the windows. The baby sucked its thumb and stared at Snake River, while Tommy, the five year old, climbed hilariously over the showman's lap.

"We'll have to sell," Martin Lambert admitted from where he sat. "I thought maybe we could hold out, that maybe I could bring in some wells. But I've had no luck; the only water is that trickle in the sink hole where the old river used to

come up, and that isn't enough for any help."

Snake River nodded. "I can't think of a thing," he admitted. "Seth Torker's got us where the hair is short."

He pulled a coin from Tommy's ear, and then had to repeat the trick three more times. Mary Lambert smiled at the byplay from the stove.

"Now what?" Snake River asked.

"Well, I've got a buyer coming out Friday," Lambert said, "but I don't think he'll dare buck Torker. I guess Torker'll win eventually, at his own price."

"How about the stock?"

"I can sell it anywhere; your water saved it."

"We're going farther West," Mary Lambert said. "My brother wrote and said there are lots of small towns out that way. He says the land is just aching for a plow."

"I guess you're right," Snake River admitted, and sighed softly. "Once, there was a time when I could figure out something; but I'm too old now, I reckon."

Lambert shrugged. "You're not so old," he said. "Anyway, this is just a squeeze we can't break. I'm only sorry you got Torker mad; now he'll force you to sell, too."

Bob Lambert came through the door. "All through, Dad," he said.

"Good! We'll eat now," Mary Lambert said. "A hot meal will do us all good."

They ate, Martin Lambert saying grace with a clumsy eloquence. The food was hot and rich and satisfying, and Snake River ate with heightened appetite. There was small talk, the showman driving deep into his memories for stories of things he had seen and done.

There was a friendship and camaraderie here he had not experienced in many months, and he enjoyed it. There was an integrity he liked, a sense of family which to some might have seemed commonplace and perhaps dull. But because he was alone, because he had no family, he enjoyed the evening and was strangely content.

He left early, waving goodbye from the buggy seat, and turned once to see the small house disappear into the night. Somewhere a coyote yapped with short staccato barks, and the moon was a silver pumpkin in a sable sky.

Maude plodded along, somnolently content, and Snake River let her take her time, feeling no urge for speed. A stogie was gripped in his strong teeth, and his belt was tight about his well-filled belly. For the moment he had no worries.

He saw the brief spurt of light spear upward in the night ahead. Seconds later, the muffled sound of an explosion touched his ears. He knew then, as surely as if he had been told, that he had underestimated Seth Torker.

He put Maude into a run, slashing her with the whip. The buggy careened time and again, almost upsetting, and he used Maude to pull it back into line. The horse was sweating, faint foam on her flanks, when Snake River swung her into the yard before his house.

He reined in, eyes sweeping the land, searching for damage. The house was all right, and behind it the medicine wagon was undamaged. He laughed wryly to himself; his nerves were getting him down.

He saw the windmill then. It leaned a bit drunkenly, as though one supporting leg had faltered in its strength.

He dropped from the buggy, letting the reins fall free. He ran with lithe speed to the well, smelling the strong odor of burned black powder still hanging in the air. Sickness came to him then, for he knew what Torker or his men had done.

There was a note, laid on the ground and held there with a scrap of iron. He caught it up, thumbing a match alight.

"Is this dam strong enough?" the note read in brutal irony.

Snake River Jim crumpled the paper in his fist. Yes, the dam was strong enough; it had closed the well, black powder blasting the hole to bits and filling it in. Yes, the dam was strong enough, and the threat behind it was even stronger. He flipped the match away.

Snake River Jim began to swear in a soft tight voice. Anger reared into full life in him then, uncoiling like a restless snake. He'd stirred up a hornet's nest, right enough, and he had been the one stung. The thought rankled and burned. He flung the note aside and stalked stiff-legged to unharness Maude.

* * * *

Morning had come and gone, hot and sultry as each morning was these days. For hours, Snake River Jim and Martin

Lambert had labored, trying to clear the well which had been blown to rubble the night before. But Torker's men had done their job with a cold skill which left complete ruin in its wake. The well had completely collapsed, rock and earth intermingled so tightly nothing could be accomplished.

Martin Lambert echoed the thought first. Swabbing a sweat-sodden kerchief at his face, he shook his head.

"It's no use, Snake River," he admitted futilely. "The only thing to do is drill another well."

Snake River nodded, bleak eyes swinging toward the Rocking W. "I figured that," he said, "but then I remembered Wilkins took his drill down South. He likely won't be back for another month."

Lambert scowled, fingering rough-cut into his pipe. "I guess we're licked," he said slowly. "With no water on your land, and only a trickle at the edge of mine—well, we haven't a chance of pulling through."

He thrust his arms through the holes of his vest, turning toward the house. Snake River sighed and slowly followed. His mustache drooped, and the sense of defeat in him was a solid weight against which he could not straighten.

He felt more sorry then for the man ahead than for himself. After all, he had lived his life; it meant little to anyone if he were defeated. But Lambert had his family to consider; and it was here they had seen the growth and development of their land, their dream.

"I need a drink," Snake River Jim said savagely. "Come along, and we'll celebrate our losing."

He swung about the neat adobe house, going toward the medicine wagon which had served him so well in the past. Nostalgia touched him; he and this medicine wagon had travelled much together. Oil torches had flared in yellow light at either end of the stage while he had run his spiel, gathering the listeners into the cocoon of his talk, telling them of the miracles Elixir of Life would produce in the lame and the halt and the blind.

It had been a good life, if a tough one. But such living was for the young, was for a man who could laugh for the sheer love of being alive. That, of course, lay far behind; Snake River had lived his day, now he could number his years with intuitive clarity.

"Hell!" he said bitterly and climbed the three steps at the back of the wagon.

He pushed the door back, and odors touched him, fragrant and stale, the tang of alcohol, the cloudy vapors of the flavoring extracts he used in the elixir.

"I've always wondered what this looked like," Martin Lambert said at his back.

Snake River felt a glow of pride. "Take a look," he offered. "Those are the bottles, that's the mixing kettle." His hand touched tightly-rolled canvas. "These are the banners I hang for each performance."

Lambert walked slowly about in the cramped space, seeing the single bunk, the gleaming glass. Red and green and amber liquid stirred in large bottles, rocked by the shifting weight of the men in the wagon.

"Finest ingredients a man can buy," Snake River said, and lifted a tall bottle of coloring material from a rack. "Pure alcohol, flavoring extract three dollars a quart, coloring extract almost ten dollars a quart. I tell you, my Elixir of Life was the finest made anywhere."

A cow bawled in pain. The cry rose in a deep bellow of anguish, and in that second, Lambert and Snake River crossed to the door.

"What the hell!" Lambert said, and dropped to the ground. "There!" He pointed.

Snake River swore softly. His ten head of cattle had broken the fence about the water-sink-hole, and one was on its belly, front legs tightly wedged into the hole.

"Get your horse," Snake River said, and ran lithely toward the sink-hole.

The incident was easy to reconstruct in his mind. The fence was flimsy and had broken before the cattle's pressing weight. They had not been watered all day, and they had been drawn there instinctively by the odor of the water from the sink-hole. One had slipped and wedged its legs.

"Shoo, git!" Snake River said and waved his free hand, realizing he still carried a bottle of extract from the wagon.

The cattle gave ground, eyeing the old showman, and then spread back, pacing away when Lambert rode up on his horse. The cow still bawled, chest and belly tight to the ground, hind legs straddled and straining.

Snake River laid the bottle on the ground, estimating and evaluating the situation. "Throw a rope about her neck and over her shoulders," he said to Lambert. "I'll use a fence post for a lever. We'll pop her out, over and back, like a cork."

But if the words were easy, the work was not. Thirty minutes of labor were necessary, the cow bawling, struggling, almost breaking her legs. But at last she was free, standing on skinned legs.

"Git!" Snake River said, and flapped his hat.

The cow turned, breaking into a shambling run. Lambert came from his saddle, coiling his rope.

"I forgot about this place," he said thoughtfully. "Maybe you can pail enough water out of here to get by until Wilkins comes back with his well drill."

"Maybe," Snake River agreed and bent over the hole. Far below, he could hear the sound of rushing water.

The hole was barely two feet across, dangerous to a man. Nothing could save a person who slid into the depths. Snake River bent over, trying to peer into the depths, nodding a bit at Lambert's suggestion.

"I think—" he began, and the grey Stetson lifted from his head.

The whiplike report of the rifle shot came two seconds later.

"Bushwhack!" Snake River said, and dropped instinctively.

His hand touched the bottle and it disappeared into the hole without sound. A second slug puffed dust into the showman's face. Then Lambert was yanking him up and pulling him toward the safety of the house.

"Get out of sight," Lambert snapped.

THEY RAN, dodging from side to side, feeling like hunted coyotes, naked in the raw sunlight. Only when they were safe behind the house did they stop for breath.

"Close!" Snake River Jim, said, and the dim anger piling in him burst into white heat. "Toker's out to kill now, that's for certain."

"Yeah!" Martin Lambert said. "What if he sent men to my house?"

"You better get going," Snake River advised.

"You come along."

"No!" Purpose burned in Snake River's eyes. "I've got a few words to say to Seth Torker."

Lambert shook his head. "Don't be a fool," he snapped.

"Son," Snake River said, "you best get back to your family."

"All right," Lambert said, and ran for his horse.

Snake River Jim watched him go. He saw the horse back away from a clutching hand; and then Lambert was in the saddle, kicking his mount into a flat ground-eating run. Only then did he go about the house and into the front door.

He found the gunbelt and single gun looped over the bed. His hands were nerveless as he buckled the belt and checked the loads. It had been long since he had used a gun, but a bitter urge burned in him now, and he knew what must be done.

He harnessed Maude to the rig, watching the land. But it was evident the hidden gunman had vamoosed, taking no chances. After all, a bushwhacker's slug killed a

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man as well on one day as on the next one.

He touched Maude with the whip, gaining speed. The rig creaked in wild protest, wheels jouncing. Indignation burned deep inside the old showman, and his goatee bristled belligerently.

"The polecat!" he said to laboring Maude. "The ornery polecat!"

He drove for minutes, stopping to let Maude blow at the top of the last rise. Far ahead, he could see the main house of the Rocking W. Shadows stretched; within hours the sun would be completely gone. He loosened the gun in his holster, shifting the belt into a more comfortable position.

He could see the new lake, the sun's rays touching it. It lay like a pool of blood, spreading and stagnant, crimson in the sunlight. A few cattle were at its edge, moving slowly, drinking; all hidden from the ranchhouse by a swell of land.

A thought touched Snake River, touched and clung limpetlike. Some of the urgency went from him, and automatically his fingers fumbled for a stogie. He bit away the end, then thumbed a match alight and drew in fragrant smoke.

The thought had become twins, and then others came swinging in. He was remembering things, scraps of information, stories, tales told by the townspeople. They merged and coalesced, growing into a whole.

"I'll be damned!" Snake River Jim said to Maude who snuffled through widespread nostrils. "I will be damned!"

He heard the pounding of hooves at his back and turned in the seat. He recognized Lambert and his son, riding down the road, their horses at a dead run.

He waved them to a halt, the horses breathing in great blowing gasps. Martin Lambert's voice was hoarse, his face white with strain.

"They shot three times at my place," he said harshly. "By God, Torker'll never shoot at another woman!"

"Wait a minute," Snake River said, his eyes on the boy.

Bob Lambert was wet and muddy, red staining his shirt and trousers. He carried a gun, too, a rifle much too large and heavy for him.

"What happened to you, Bob?" Snake River asked, and instinctively knew the answer.

"I climbed into the old river hole," the boy said. "I figured maybe we could sink a well there." He looked down. "The clay sure stained me up."

"To hell with this!" Lambert said savagely. "I'm going down. You coming, Snake River?"

The old showman shook his head. "Better not," he advised. "Anyway, I've got a plan which might work. I just got the idea, and you folks make it have sense. Listen—"

"No!" Martin Lambert said flatly.

Snake River frowned. "You can't take this boy down and get him murdered; what kind of a father are you?"

"I'm big enough to pull a trigger!" Bob said hotly.

"Well—" Lambert began.

"Listen to me," Snake River said.

"I've listened to you enough," Lambert said then. "The boy has to grow up some day, and now's as good a time as any."

Snake River Jim nodded. He saw the pattern, saw it clearly. The ranch was a trap, a sweet brutal trap laid by Torker. Lambert and the boy wouldn't have a chance. And later, the Sheriff would call the killings justified in self-defense.

"Listen," he said. "Bend down while I whisper."

He had no choice; he knew that. Lambert would listen to no reasonable arguments. This had to be done fast.

Martin Lambert scowled, but he kneed his horse toward the buggy, bending down. And as he bent over, Snake River moved. His hand flashed with incredible speed, catching at his holstered gun. He caught and drew, and then he had pistol-whipped the man out of the saddle, dropping him slackly to the ground.

He heard the soundless cry of the boy; and then he had caught up the reins and was sending Maude down the hill at a run. He looked back once and saw Bob bending over his father. Then dust boiled up and he was alone.

He slowed Maude after a time, catching his breath. He hadn't liked pistol-whipping Lambert into unconsciousness, but it had had to be done, for the man would never have listened. And now Bob would stay with his father. With any luck, he would have plenty of time to talk to Seth Torker.

With any luck, he should be able to sell

his land to the rancher. With any luck.

He laughed a bit at the thought.

SETH TORKER was waiting. He sat on the porch, apparently idling away the day, but a tightness lay in his face, and his eyes were cold and cautious. He wore a gun, too, which was strange, for he prided himself upon using his brains and not his hands to win arguments.

He smiled, though, at Snake River Jim and waved him down from the rig. "Didn't expect to see you so soon, Snake River," he called. "Change your mind about selling?"

The mockery of his words tightened Snake River's generous mouth, but he forced a smile and climbed down from the rig and walked to the porch. He saw the wink of sunlight on steel, down by the corner of the barn, and knew a rifle tracked his every movement. Another gunnie stood near the hitchrack, ostensibly relacing a saddle skirt, which was indeed strange, for the sunlight was a hot blanket on his head.

"Just thought I'd talk a bit," Snake River answered, and found a comfortable position in a second chair.

"Glad to have you," Torker said, and loosened a fresh cigar between stubby fingers.

Snake River spat over the rail. This was like old times, like meeting a slicker over a card table. Two hole cards had been dealt; he knew Torker's, but the rancher had no inkling of the one beneath the showman's hand.

"Had a bit of trouble at home last night," Snake River said. "Seems like somebody dropped a bag of black powder into my well, blowing it to smithereens."

"Is that right?" Seth Torker said mildly.

"Fact!" Snake River spat over the rail.

Seth Torker shook his head. "Wild bunch about here. Wonder who could have done such a thing?"

Snake River drew his second card in the game.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "Seems like whoever did it forgot I've got a sink-hole with water twenty feet or so down. I'll just pail up water until Wilkins gets back with his drilling rig."

"You—" Seth Torker drew a deep breath. "I'd forgotten about the sink-holes. I'd forgotten all about that."

Snake River smiled. "Figured you had." He preened his mustache. "Also, somebody took a pot shot at me and Martin Lambert. Bad shooting!"

"This is awful!" Torker said: "I'll have to tell the Sheriff about such goings on."

Snake River drew a third card in that mythical game. It matched his hole card.

"Don't bother," he said. "I reckon I can stand a bit of excitement. Anyway, as I say, I've got water in the sink-hole. Why, a man would have to use twenty or thirty pounds of powder to blow it shut."

"That much, eh!" Seth Torker said. "Well, if I was doing the job, I'd use about fifty."

Snake River nodded. He'd seen Torker's third card; it was no good.

"Fifty'd raise hell," he admitted. "Close everything tighter'n a drum."

" 'Scuse me," Torker said genially. "I'll get some drinks out here."

He came from the chair and entered the house. Snake River smiled gently at the man who patiently laced and unlaced the edge of the saddle skirt. "Hot day," he remarked loudly, and chuckled quietly at the scowl from the other.

Then Seth Torker was back, cool glasses of ruby wine in his hands. He handed one to the showman and sat again in his chair. In back, a horse made pounding sounds on the hard earth.

"Well," Torker said, "seeing as how you're having so much trouble, it might be best to sell out to me. I've got the men to stop such things."

"Sounds logical," Snake River admitted. "Still, I don't know. I figured on letting Lambert have as much of my water as he wanted. Seems like pretty much a shame to let him down."

Torker flushed faintly, then drew a paper from his pocket. "Here's a bill of sale made out with your name on it," he said. "Thought you might sell."

Snake River saw the horseman pause at the far end of the pasture. He was high in the saddle, shading his eyes with his hand.

"Don't figure on selling," he said quietly.

Seth Torker stood and leaned over the rail. His hand waved, and the horseman waved back. Then the rider was gone, riding fast.

"Know where that man's going?" Tork-

er said gently, smiling across the wine.

"Probably to blow up my sink-hole," Snake River said. "What do you figure that'll gain you?"

Torker frowned at the complacency of the old man. "Figure it out," he said. "You've no water, once the hole is closed. Nobody's going to drill wells, and if they did, there wouldn't be enough water for stock and growing crops. Maybe you'd better sell out legal, while I'll still pay hard cash."

Snake River grinned. "Blow up the sink-hole," he said. "What'll it get you? The land's no good without water."

Torker nodded. "When my lake backs up enough," he said, "I'll put a notch through a canyon wall. The water will go through your land just the way it did through Lambert's."

Sanke River Jim considered the words. "That makes sense," he admitted. "Guess I'll sell."

He looked at his phantom fourth card. It matched the third. Now he held three of a kind.

"Sign and get the money," Torker said flatly.

Snake River signed. He wet the extended pencil with his tongue and then wrote his name with a swaggering flourish. Seth Torker caught the paper, grinning, while Snake River leisurely counted the extended packet of bills.

He shoved the money into his pocket, and then stood. "Guess I'll be running along," he said. "Too bad your man's blowing up the sink-hole on your land."

Seth Torker started, half-rising, and then sank back. "Doesn't matter," he said, "I don't figure on pailing water."

Snake River paced to his rig, climbing lightly to the seat.

"Might figure on it, Torker," he said. "Figuring never hurt anybody."

He exposed his hole card, and had a phantom card dealt him face down. He didn't look at it, gathering ghost-chips for the final play.

"Funny thing about this land," he called back. "Ever stop to think how you got your water?"

Seth Torker understood then, he understood and his face went white. He lunged from the chair, staring toward the place a rider had waited for a signal. Then he whirled, stabbing at the single gun at his side.

"Stop that man," he bellowed. "Cut him down."

Snake River was firing. He threw three shots at Torker, and watched the man slam back against the wall of the house. He shot low, not trying to kill; and when he saw Torker's hand grab at his leg, he knew he hadn't missed. He swung then to face the man at the hitchrack. His gun came up; it was only then he realized he hadn't a chance.

The gunnie was waiting, almost casually. His gun was out, lining up, finger cramped about the trigger. He was smiling a bit, without humor, his eyes blank sheets of ice.

He fired. He fired, and the bullet ripped dust from the road. He squeezed the trigger again, even as he fell, and then he was on his side, watching his life pump from his chest in a crimson flood.

Echoing from far away, came the muffled crack of Martin Lambert's rifle.

Snake River Jim slashed reins at Maude's back, and the horse went instinctively into a run. The rig whirled on two wheels, almost upsetting; and then Snake River was using the whip, drawing every bit of speed out of the horse.

He heard the startled crack of a rifle behind and crouched low, feeling his hat tugged away by the wind. He grinned to himself, despite the danger, and turned his head to watch the Rocking W draw away. Men were running, going toward the house where Seth Torker lay with a wounded leg.

Snake River straightened, safe at last. He felt no particular fear. No one would follow; none would face the accurate rifle fire of his ally in the hill. He slowed Maude, keeping her at a run, and looked ahead where Martin Lambert and Bob waited beside their horses.

He heard the thudding boom of an explosion. Smoke spiralled blackly to his right, rising from the blown sink-hole. He watched the smoke rise in a solid pillar, only to dissipate into a thinning cloud.

"Maybe!" he whispered, and let Maude slow to a stop beside the man and boy. "Thanks for the shooting," he called out. "That was close."

Martin Lambert scowled. "I should have plugged you," he said. "No man ever

pistol whipped me before this one time!"

But Snake River wasn't listening. He was watching the blood-red lake below, straining his eyes in the late sunlight; and one hand reached out to turn over the phantom card in that mythical game.

He saw the smoke on the water, saw the churning foam and the gust of waves which sprayed upward from the depths. He saw the water roil and whirl and then settle back. He turned the card—four of a kind.

"My game and my pot," he said to Martin Lambert, who blinked, not understanding. "I'll see you at your home in a couple of hours. Watch yourself; Torker may not be through."

He slapped reins and rode away, not looking back.

SNAKE RIVER JIM sat on the seat of the medicine wagon, holding tight reins against the eagerness which infected Maude and Susie.

"They're ready to go," he said to Martin Lambert.

"You promised to explain," Lambert said. "I've got the idea of what happened, but not everything. What did you do?"

Snake River Jim smoothed back his long white hair, silver now in the growing moonlight. His eyes twinkled and his mustaches flared with piratical egotistical arrogance.

"It was simple," he said, "after I once got the idea. When the bushwhacker shot at us, I knocked a bottle of red coloring extract into the sink-hole. Later, when I saw the lake was colored red, I knew Torker's artesian river ran beneath my land. And when I saw Bob's clothes, I knew some of that dyed water came out on your land.

"I had nothing to lose, anyway, so I sold out to Torker, first making sure he blew up my sink-hole. He blew it, blew it good; he must have used fifty pounds of powder. Anyway, there's no sink-hole now, only a great sunken stretch in the land where the river-tunnel collapsed.

"When the tunnel collapsed, the water was cut off from Torker's land and sought its old channel. It's your water now; and I don't figure there's going to be any more changes, nature or black powder to the contrary."

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He grinned at the river which had sprung in full flood from the monster hole in Lambert's land. It wound like polished lead along the old bed, bringing life to the land which would never leave, for it alone of the streams in the territory never vanished nor fluctuated.

"You took a chance," Martin Lambert said quietly.

"Hell, yes," Snake River said, and blushed unseen in the moonlight. He didn't curse before women, and Mary Lambert was at her husband's side.

"We'd nothing to lose," he finished his explanation. "Torker held all the cards, so we had to play a bluff. I hit you because I didn't want any shooting, not with a boy around."

"I'm big enough," young Bob Lambert said sullenly from where he stood.

"Sure," Snake River said, and grinned. "But you wait until you have to shoot before you pack a gun."

Mary Lambert stirred. "But where will you go, Snake River?" she asked. "We want you to stay here with us."

"Me?" Snake River stared toward the moonlit horizon. "Well, I'll amble on. I figure to see some of that land your brother wrote about."

"But you're—I mean—"

Snake River Jim laughed, and the sound was wild and carefree, belying his white hair and whiskered face. His teeth were strong and even, and the hand he reached down to Mary's shoulder was hard and firm.

"Old!" he said. "Well, maybe, if you figure by the calendar. But not so old, if you figure it other ways. It's a funny thing," he finished, "but I feel younger now than I have in months. You see, I'm a fiddlefoot, a rover; I guess maybe me and Maude and Susie will just keep going until we drop in our tracks."

He gripped Martin Lambert's hand.

"Good luck," he said, and twitched the reins.

He looked ahead, watched the far horizon. Danger lived there, and excitement. It tugged at him with ghostly threads stronger than steel. There lay his destiny.

"Git along, Maude; hup, Susie," he said.

Snake River Jim was on his way.

BIG FREEZE-OUT

THE GREAT FREEZE of 1887 when countless thousands of cattle perished on the Montana, Wyoming and Dakota ranges will be remembered and retold as long as cows are run there. But long before that period, other thousands of ruminants perished in unusually severe or unseasonable weather. There were the buffalo.

The buffalo was tough to kill, and it took tough weather to do it, but occasionally it happened. Unlike cows and horses who turn rumpside to the blizzard and drift before it, the buffalo faces the wintry blasts and toughs it out. During an unseasonable snowstorm in 1820 in the region of the Peace and Hay River in Saskatchewan, 14 feet of snow fell in a few days' time. This was too much for Mr. and Mrs. Bison and they perished by the tens of thousands.

Nor was this the only peril flinging death wholesale at the big beasts. Thousands were drowned each spring when ice on river and lake broke beneath the weight of migrating herds.

Not all these brutes were drowned. Many were mired in the mud and stayed there to starve to death or succumb to wolf and coyote or sink till they finally suffocated. In the meantime, the buzzards were busy picking out their eyes. Mother nature was tough in those days.

John McDonnell, exploring the Qu'Appelle (What name?) River in May of 1795, spent one entire day counting drowned and bogged bison. By nightfall his tally was seven thousand and sixty. He said of that: "It's true, in one or two places I stepped from one carcass to another where they lay from three to five deep."

Despite these annual losses the buffalo herds were calculated to run in the neighborhood of thirty million head when the white man first came upon them. Then he went to work with his Sharps .44 and .50 and wholesale slaughter followed. The buffalo were almost exterminated in a single decade.

—*Roy Vandergoot*

The RIPROARIOUS WEST

By Robbins and Farren

In the town of Clayton, Texas, today there is a restaurant called Bimbo's Bar and Grill, commemorating the original Bimbo McClure, a stout pioneer, who was noted in early Texas days not only for his appetite but for his enormous capacity for food. One Fourth of July, 1878, Bimbo entered a pie-eating contest. "Do you think you can eat sixty huckleberry pies?" someone asked him jokingly. Bimbo scratched his head. "I dunno," he said, "I'll find out." With that, he went out and consumed sixty cherry pies. "Yes," he said, returning to the contest, "I can eat sixty huckleberry pies." And right then and there, he did.

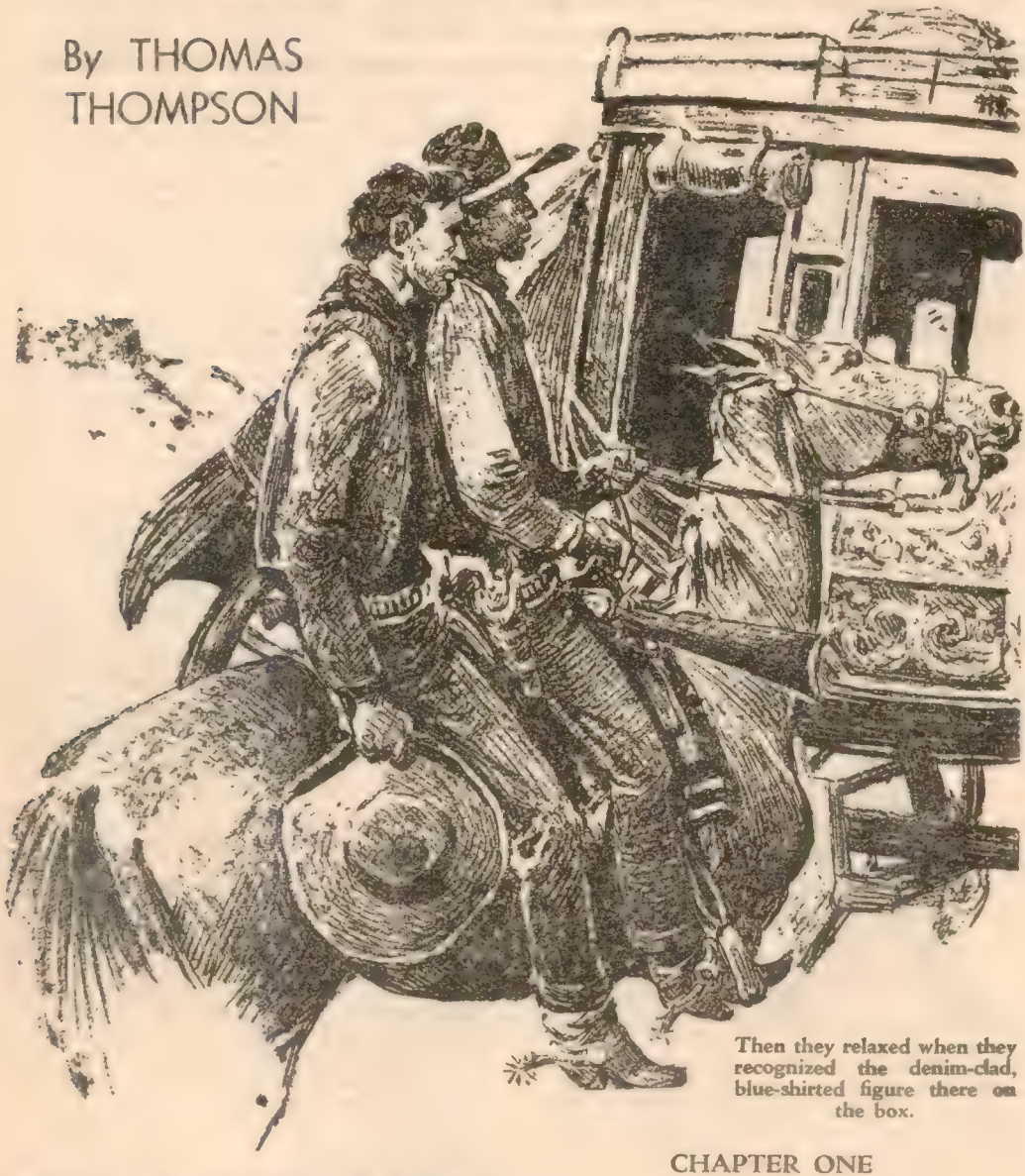
In the fall of 1870, a few art-conscious San Franciscans persuaded the world-renowned violinist, Mischa Polowetsky, to make a concert appearance there. Loftily, he insisted that to him the very mention of money was vulgar, but he nevertheless managed to indicate that his fee would be $5,000. Much to everyone's surprise, the long-haired artist went over big with the rough miners and gamblers in the audience, and they showered him with San Francisco's traditional tribute—a rain of gold and silver coins. Art lovers, horrified, expected him to stalk offstage in a rage, but instead, he did the practical thing—stopping in the middle of a trill, he fell down on his satin-clad knees and eagerly gathered in every last dollar.

Although the Widower Elkins was rich in goldmine holdings, and had fastened a quarter-million-dollar dowry on his daughters Cecile, Mary and Sue, no man in Freeport County could be found who would marry any one of them—they were all revoltingly ugly. Finally, as the three approached old-maidhood, the desperate father went out and rounded up three eligible men and a preacher to solve his problem with a shotgun wedding. The three disgruntled sons-in-law, once legally married, were helpless to remedy their own plight, but two weeks later, at the point of a pistol, they forced their father-in-law to take for his second wife Miss Betsy Tompkins, a schoolteacher who was rightly called the ugliest woman in Wyoming.

"Handsome Harry" was the nickname by which Harry Koch, a young and dapper assayer, was known in the gold and cattle town of Fire Acres, California. It was true that his wide shoulders, his thick, curly hair, his gleaming white teeth and his trim waistline were the delight of every girl and the despair of every man in town. But that was before he got into a public fight with a drover named Johnny Meyers, who knocked out his false teeth, tore off his padded coat, sent his wig rolling down Main Street and stripped him all the way down to his whale-boned corset.

BOOTHILL FREIGHTERS'

By THOMAS THOMPSON



Then they relaxed when they recognized the denim-clad, blue-shirted figure there on the box.

Windy McCloud knew that the frozen-eyed gunman had no business hanging around Lucy. But what can you do with a girl who's hell-bent on wrecking everything for which her bushwhacked freighter father stood, fought—and died?

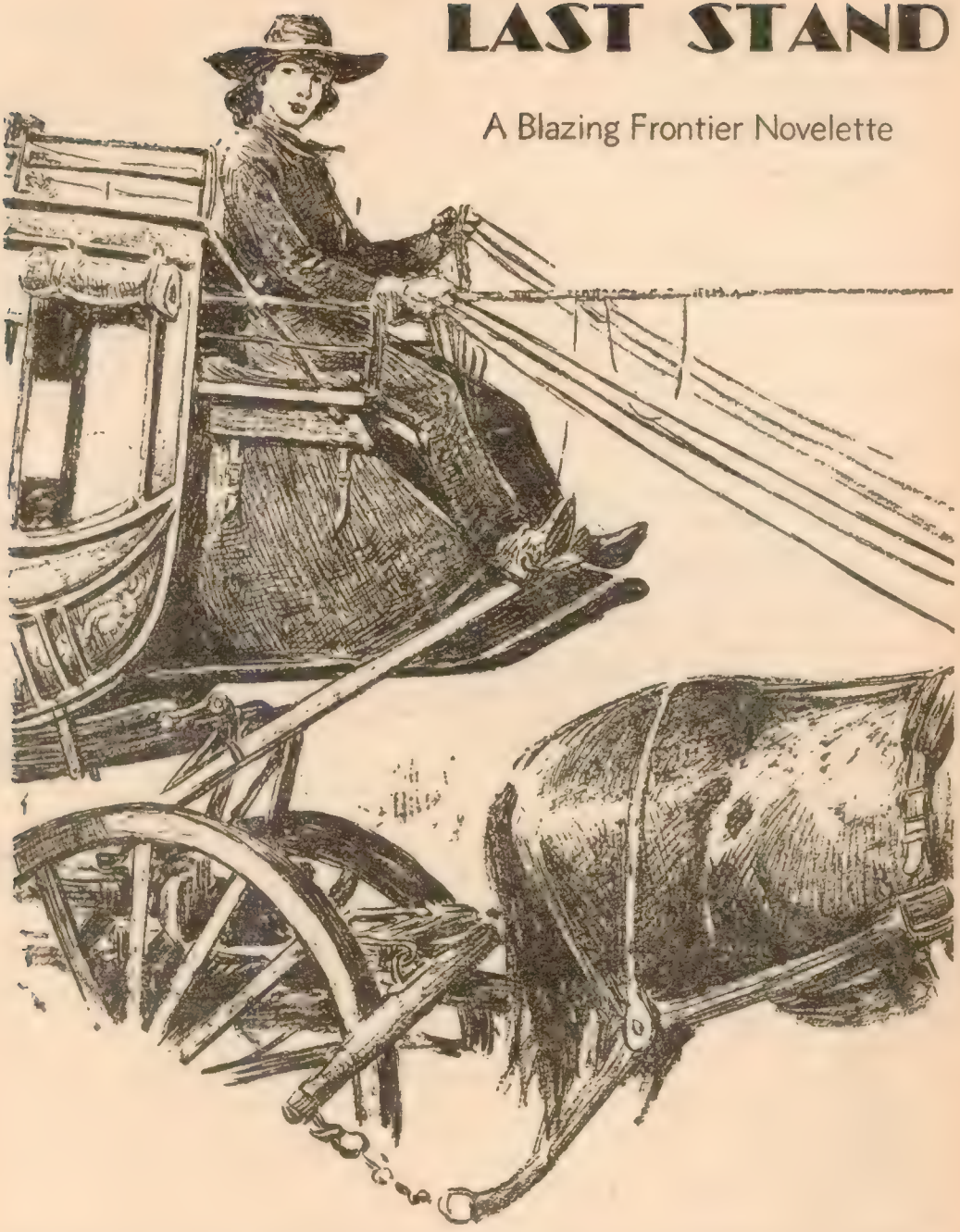
CHAPTER ONE

Back-Shot!

IN ANOTHER half-hour the sun would be down. Already the barren brown mine-gashed hills in back of town had laid their blue shadows over the cluster of deserted buildings that curled like the withering edges of a leaf around the town of Randsburg. Here in the only occupied

LAST STAND

A Blazing Frontier Novelette



room of a ten-room house the light was so faint that the lanky redhead at the table had to lean close to see the cards. The old man in the bed no longer shaded off the glare with a transparent blue-veined hand. There wasn't much left of the old man's voice. He said, "Two jacks, eh? Well I'll jest raise you five!" The voice hardly sounded.

The homely redhead had a touch of Texas in his movements and a lot of Texas in his voice. He laid down the cards, tilted back in his chair and said, "Doggone it, Matt, this is a bunch of dern foolishness—me

playing both hands. I can't play poker knowing for sure what the other man's holding. Why don't you stretch out there and rest?"

The old man's voice had a certain cockiness that even the nearness of death couldn't knock out. He said, "Windy McCloud, you always did talk too dern much. Now shet up and play cards. Where I'm goin' there won't be nothin' to do but rest, because I sure as hell ain't gonna let the devil talk me into shovelin' coal. Jack in the hole and jack showin', you say? Raise you five."

Windy McCloud dropped his chair to the floor, reached across the table and shoved in a chip from the pile that stood in front of the empty chair. The dying man on the bed cackled gleefully. Windy's eyes began smarting as if an invisible dust had blown into the room. He shoved in three chips from his own pile and said, "The hell with you. Raise you two more!"

He could tell by the change in breathing that the old man was going fast. He tried to pretend that everything was all right. He said, "Two more!" with an odd choke in his voice.

Old Matt said, "So long, Windy. You're the best damn friend a man ever had."

There wasn't any use answering.

Windy pulled the sheet up over the thin face. For a long time he stood there, looking down at the man who had been his friend. Absently he picked up the cards and dealt the final two. The dead man drew a third jack to beat Windy's two pair. Windy grinned wryly and shoved the chips toward the empty chair. Then he went outside, closing the door softly behind him.

The girl knew the minute she saw him. He put his arms around her and held her close while she sobbed softly.

An old timer had said once that it took more than a drink of whiskey to make a man like Randsburg, and it was partly so. Laid out in the only canyon within miles that was wide enough to let a jackass and a man pass shoulder to shoulder, the town had a way of twisting in and out upon itself, one block never knowing for sure what the next one was doing. For a brief flurry it had held perhaps ten thousand souls, but that had been six years ago. Now Randsburg was dying.

The reason was silver. Plenty of silver to support a big town and start a big stampede, but not enough silver to attract the kind of money it took to build a smelter or drag a railroad within hauling distance. Eventually it cost more to mine and market the product than the product was worth, and the natural exodus began.

Men sold their property for enough to pay for the timbers that shored the tunnels. Other men bought it, sold it again, and new blood moved in. A few persisted, and for a while they continued to hire Matt Menowitz's M&M Freight Line to haul their ore. But the boom days were gone and Matt was left with three dozen wagons more than he needed, a couple of hundred head of mules that ate whether they worked or not—and a daughter who seemed to need some guidance in choosing her friends.

Another man would have sold out, but Matt was stubborn. Windy McCloud, at first general manager, later strawboss, still later shotgun guard, and most recently mule-skinner, janitor and male nurse, backed the old man up and hung on. All because of an enterprise that existed only on paper, under the pompous name of the Mt. Scott, Bisbee and Cedarbrake Railroad. If it ever got built, and it looked like it might, it would pass within twenty-five miles of Randsburg. To Matthew Menowitz and Windy McCloud that meant a rebirth of the low grade mines and a string of ore wagons twenty-five miles long, moving day and night.

They figured it out again and again, and it always added up to big business. And they weren't the only ones in town who figured a freight line from Randsburg to the new railroad would be a thing worth owning. Nyeland Grubb had made a fairly decent offer; "in behalf of the syndicate he represented". But old Matt had no intention of selling; especially not to Nyeland Grubb, in spite of the fact that his daughter Lucy insisted Grubb was a gentleman.

That was the trouble with women, Windy McCloud often told himself. There was just no way of figuring them out. Old ladies trusted him, dogs and kids loved him, and women between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five always looked upon him as a big brother. And now with old Matt dead with a bullet through his back it seemed that was what Windy was going to have to be to Lucy Menowitz, whether he liked it or

not. A big brother with a bankrupt freight line and a handful of trouble.

The funeral was decently over and things were beginning to shape up. He felt he couldn't afford to put it off any longer now, so he waited until he knew for sure she wasn't around, then he tip-toed to his own room in the big ten-room house that in palmier days had served as headquarters, club and free hotel for both the owner and the employees of the M&M Freight Company. Windy kept thinking of Lucy bustling around that big house, a feather-duster in her hand and a smile for every man she met. Maybe that was the trouble. Raised by her dad and a couple of dozen soft-hearted mule skinners, she thought all men were good.

Well, Windy decided, that was his problem. And the more he thought about it the more he knew the M&M Freight Line was going to have to hold on until that railroad was within hauling distance. Dang it, Matthew Menowitz had been his friend and he had counted on Windy to see that Lucy made out all right.

But there was some things Lucy just couldn't see straight, and one of them was Nyeland Grubb. Windy buckled on his guns and let himself out the side door.

Randsburg was just small enough so that you couldn't miss a stranger. There was a stranger in town this morning. He was standing there on the sidewalk in front of Nyeland Grubb's office and he was talking to Wiley Peters and Ben Traub. That in itself made the stranger interesting as far as Windy was concerned.

Peters and Traub had both worked for the M&M back in the flush days. They'd finally got a little careless in their thieving of receipts, and Windy figured he had better fire them. It had taken a little better than an hour to get the two of them completely fired, and men still talked about it around Randsburg.

Rumors floated back later, that they were connected with the flourishing cattle business that went on by night between Old Mexico and Arizona Territory. Then, three months ago—about the time Nyeland Grubb started getting insistent about buying up the M&M—Peters and Traub had drifted back to Randsburg. Old Matt's being shot in the back cinched things as far as Windy was concerned. Maybe he didn't have any proof, but according to Windy's way of thinking he had plenty to start on.

Peters, Traub and the stranger had seen him now. They had turned and spread out and they were standing there waiting.

Windy stopped about ten feet away, his body tense. He said, "I remember telling you boys not to come back to Randsburg."

Wiley Peters shifted his weight slightly but kept his arms folded. His lower lip bulged from the wad of snuff he always kept there. Ben Traub, a man who seemed to take great pride in being unclean, spat out over the edge of his broad chin and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He never carried a six-shooter, though he often packed a rifle, even on the street. His eyes were bloodshot and his lips chapped, as were his cheeks where they showed above the inch-long stubble of beard. Standing between them, the stranger was a conspicuous misfit, and yet instinct told Windy McCloud that he was the most dangerous of the three.

The stranger's white broad-brimmed Stetson was pushed back at a jaunty angle, revealing closely-cropped curly black hair. He was smoothly shaven and powdered: a dandy.

The stranger sized up Windy with a contemptuous glance. He said to Wiley Peters, "Does this long-legged jigger own the town, maybe?"

Peters grinned flatly. He said, "You two ain't met, have yuh? You ought to know each other. Windy McCloud, Harvey Rouleaux!"

Windy hoped fervently that he hadn't betrayed the sudden little chill that ran unexpectedly up his back and twitched for a second between his shoulderblades. He said steadily, "I've heard about you, Rouleaux. I've got no quarrel with you. It's Peters and Traub I'm talking to."

"Maybe they're friends of mine," Harvey Rouleaux said softly.

Windy shrugged. He said, "Maybe, but I've heard tell you travel alone."

"Maybe you heard wrong," said Harvey Rouleaux. Then, "Go on in the office, you two."

Peters and Traub obeyed, grinning indolently at McCloud. Windy said softly, "You picking up their cards?"

"I might," said Harvey Rouleaux.

"I'm sorry about that," Windy said

softly, "but it don't change things none. I want 'em out of town by sundown. Otherwise you and me are gonna have to work things out our own way."

He fully expected Harvey Rouleaux to say, "Let's make it now." He knew this boy's reputation. A hot headed Southerner of a well known family who had set out on a one man vendetta some three years back. His career was clouded by a thousand twisted tales, told around smokeless fires, but they all agreed that Harvey Rouleaux had once had a sister and that it had all started when her broken body was found in a swamp at the edge of town. Windy McCloud didn't know, and at this particular second he didn't care. He was waiting for that vague something that would tell him it was time to reach for his gun.

It didn't come. Instead, he saw a flush crawl into Rouleaux's cheeks. The blue eyes were looking past Windy, and they were soft where, a moment before, they had been the blue of gunmetal.

Windy stepped back a pace and turned his head warily. Lucy Menowitz was standing there, her eyes glued to the face of Harvey Rouleaux. And Windy McCloud's heart sank when he saw her eyes.

CHAPTER TWO

Two Dead, One to Go!

THE MOMENT had passed now. The coiled-steel tension ran out of Windy's fingers, and the showdown urge went with it.

Windy's hands felt big and awkward as he stood there while Lucy waited to be introduced. Her blue eyes were wide and innocent, contrasting oddly with the full maturity of her body. After a long silence, thick with embarrassment, she stamped her foot and said, "Windy McCloud, if I didn't love you so much I'd slap your face. You have the manners of a blue-nosed mule!"

She flounced around and walked into Nyeland Grubb's office, and in a few moments she was back, clinging to Grubb's arm. And Grubb, tall and handsome in a thin-faced, arrogant way, appeared not to notice the two who seconds before had been so close to powdersmoke.

Windy turned to watch them go, and his eyes met those of Harvey Rouleaux. The boy's eyes were still soft, with something almost wistful in them. Without meaning to Windy said, "Sometimes I just can't figure women out."

Harvey Rouleaux said, "I think I can figure that one, all right." He raised a hand to his wide-brimmed hat and stalked off.

Windy watched him for a minute, then turned and walked in the opposite direction. He walked past the drygoods store and the smithy and the livery stable, nodding to friends occassionally; turned a corner and went on up to the huge wagon barn. Old Eli Uhl was sitting in the little office, staring at the floor.

Eli was wrinkled, bald and toothless. He had been with the M&M ever since the beginning, and he stayed now not because of the money but because of a dog-like loyalty. He didn't look up when Windy entered. He said, "It's mighty hard for me to realize he's gone." He had been saying that for two weeks.

The heat in the office was oppressive, so Windy went outside into the huge corral and walked slowly down the long corridor of rusted ore wagons, the high-wheeled freighters and the four Concords that had once run to capacity. Now there were only two trips for Eli Uhl to make each week in one of the Concords. That hung onto the mail contract. Practically all the foodstuff that was needed to support the dwindling population came in from the surrounding farms. The two stores that were left open were so glutted with merchandise that it would take the present population ten years to use it up. As one merchant had said when Windy solicited him, "Hell, man, I don't want you to haul nothin' in to me. I want you to haul somethin' out!"

And yet, just twenty-five miles over that ridge of jagged hills there, surveyors were peering through transits and driving stakes and laying out a siding. In time the Mt. Scott, Bisbee and Cedarbrake would start its way through the canyon. But *time*: that was the joker. And money! At Matthew's death, the M&M and Windy McCloud combined had had just enough money to give the old man a decent burial and lay in a supply of groceries for one month.

On top of everything else, there was Lucy. The girl just had a streak of trusting in her that was almost childish and at

the same time she was woman enough to respond to Nyeland Grubb's smooth attentions.

Windy could see how it might be. She had never known a man like Grubb before. Handsome, polished, always saying exactly the right thing at exactly the right time. Like at the funeral, for example. Windy had to admit that without Nyeland Grubb stepping in the way he had, the funeral would have been a sight different. Lucy certainly hadn't been up to handling things and Windy just didn't know how.

But now Lucy was the sole owner of the M&M Freight Company, and offers from Grubb that had made old Matthew laugh might sound different to her. Windy had tried to explain about the railroad and all, but she just said she wasn't sure a freight line was a good business for a woman without a man. Windy had an answer for that, but the words wouldn't come out.

Then there was the little matter of running the line, supposing he could get Lucy to hang on. Up until Matt's death, Windy had been able to take a wagon and round up a load now and then around the valley. It had at least bought grub and a new dress for Lucy. But now his job was to stay in town to keep an eye on things: especially so now that Wiley Peters and Ben Traub had come back. They were the kind who might set a barn afire just to see it burn; and it was for sure they wouldn't be waiting around to introduce him formally to Harvey Rouleaux the next time they saw him.

He had been standing at a corner of the corral, his arms lying across the top rail of the fence, chin on his hands. He was miles away with his thoughts. He froze when a voice behind him said, "I'd like to have a little talk with you, McCloud."

He turned slowly, keeping his hands level with his shoulders. In the bright glare of the Arizona sun Harvey Rouleaux's face looked pale and tight. He held his hand out palm up. He said, "I came peaceful, McCloud. I heard tell around town you could use a muleskinner."

Things clicked into a pattern in Windy's mind. The way Rouleaux had backed down when he saw Lucy, and the look in Lucy's eyes when she saw the young gunman. This boy would be as quick to love as he was quick to hate—and Lucy, *in that blind loyal trusting way of hers* wouldn't ask questions about a past. Windy felt the corners of his mouth draw down. He said, "I promised Matt I'd see to it that his daughter was raised right, Rouleaux. She isn't going to get mixed up with any gunfighter. You and me had better leave things the way they were."

There was that same flood of color under Harvey Rouleaux's skin. He said, "I like the way you say that, McCloud. Down south, whatever else happens to us we got respect for our women folks. I give you my word it's not because of the girl."

Windy relaxed a little, liking the boy in spite of himself. He said, "What are you after, Rouleaux?"

"The same thing I'm always after," Rouleaux said slowly. "It happens that working for you would speed things up." He hesitated, then added, "You look like good folks to me, McCloud. If getting what I'm after happens to tie in with helping you and the girl along. That's all right."

Windy looked at him, measuring him. Finally a grin crawled across his homely face. He offered his hand. "Eli Uhl is taking the stage out this afternoon. You can take a wagon and follow him to Alamosa Canyon. Pete Salter has got a bunch of wood cut over there that he wants hauled into town."

Harvey Rouleaux's blue eyes were gunmetal hard again now. He said, "Good enough. But—I don't take orders on my personal affairs!"

WINDY asked no questions; he knew that if he had he wouldn't have got any answers. Harvey Rouleaux had made a proposition, man to man, and Windy McCloud had accepted it. There had been no mention of pay. Both understood that none was offered and none was expected. On the face of it, letting Harvey Rouleaux go to work for the M&M Freight Company didn't make sense, and yet Windy McCloud knew he'd been right to do it.

Could it be that among those three men —Wiley Peters, Ben Traub, and Nyeland Grubb—there was a name that was on Harvey Rouleaux's list? If so, Windy thought it must be Nyeland Grubb! Rouleaux had arrived in town in the company of Wiley Peters and Ben Traub, and if it had been

one of these he would have killed his man before this.

Windy had no way of knowing, but it occurred to him that Nyeland Grubb, through the grapevine of the owlhoot trails, had sent out a call for a fighting man. Harvey Rouleaux had answered that call. But now, suddenly, he had discovered that the job was not to his liking. There was no following for sure the dark channels of a mind like Rouleaux's. Perhaps he had recognized Grubb as a man he had known under another name. Perhaps it was only a whim. Then again, maybe it was a girl with wide blue eyes and an almost child-like belief in mankind.

That thought brought Windy out of his trance. He laid his fork carefully against the edge of his plate when Lucy Menowitz came into the room with a second platter of hot biscuits. She set the plate on the table, then moved around in back of him and placed a forefinger against the nape of his neck. Windy colored and sat rigidly. She said softly, "Windy. Who is Harvey Rouleaux?"

He took a big swallow of coffee. It burned his mouth. He said, "Ah, I don't know—Jest—somebody out of a job drifted into town. Lookin' for a job." He started eating again, hurriedly.

She said, "Then why don't you hire him? We need a muleskinner."

"Did," said Windy.

She sat down quickly and caught his forearm in both her hands. Her eyes were shining when she looked at him. She said, "I'm glad, Windy. I knew he wasn't a criminal."

There was no use trying to appear unconcerned any more. It wouldn't work. He put down his fork noisily and said, "Look here. What's this all about? Who said he was a criminal?"

She spoke swiftly, intently, telling him how Harvey Rouleaux had followed her and Grubb into a restaurant that day at noon. Windy listened, nodding slowly, then said, "Grubb got pretty excited, eh?"

"Mr. Rouleaux just stood there, not saying a word," Lucy said. "After a while he turned around and walked out, and I thought Mr. Grubb was going to faint. Afterwards he told me he had been on a jury that had helped convict Rouleaux of murder, and he was afraid of what he might do. Afraid he might kill him."

Windy said nothing.

"But there's something more to it than that," she added quietly.

Windy looked at her. He said with difficulty, "Lucy, are you in love with Rouleaux?"

She looked back at him intently, said, "I've only seen him twice, Windy. Could it be possible to fall in love with someone the minute you see them?"

There was a dull pain in Windy McCloud's chest. He thought back just two years to the time he had first seen her. He nodded his head and said slowly, "Yes, that could be possible, Lucy."

He got up quickly then, anxious to get away. Then, moved by an obscure impulse he turned back to her, took her roughly by the arms and held her at arm's length as a father might hold a young daughter. He made his voice as harsh as he could when he said, "Young lady, I promised your dad I'd look out for you. I'm gonna do it, if I have to turn you across my knee and paddle you hard where it will do the most good. Starting now I want you to stay away from Nyeland Grubb. You know he lied to you flat about Rouleaux, and if he'd lie once he'd lie again. I'm telling you now, don't see him any more!"

She moved forward quickly, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him on the cheek. Then, standing back, she said, "Windy, you and dad have always treated me a little too much like a child. I think I'll be able to take care of myself. I had lunch with Mr. Grubb today for business reasons only. He made me a good cash offer for the M&M."

Windy felt his knees grow watery. He said, "Lucy, I hope you didn't do anything foolish."

She inserted the tip of her forefinger between her teeth and nodded her head, imitating a bad little girl. She said, "Uncle Windy, I'm afraid I did. For a moment I forgot I was a lady and I told him to go straight to hell!"

Windy McCloud put on his hat and coat. The room wasn't quite big enough to hold all the thumping and pounding inside him. Neither was the house. Sometimes a man had to get out and get some air. If he had stayed around there another two seconds he would have—*I'm her big brother,*

he thought. *Just a big brother to her.*

He hurried down the street, keeping close to the store-fronts. He hadn't gone two blocks when he noticed the ever-growing knot of men in front of one of the saloons. By the time he got there the story was being told over and over by Pete Salter, who had ridden in from Alamosa Canyon. Windy listened, grim and silent, and the muscles bunched across his shoulders and tightened the backs of his hands.

"You know how Eli Uhl is," Salter was saying. "Figures he owns that freight company, I guess. Well, he was giving orders right and left to this young gent that was driving the wagon, and this young gent he wasn't taking to it much. Couple of times he told the old man to shut up and mind his own damn' business. We got the wagon loaded and they started off up the canyon —the young gent with the load of wood heading back toward town here, and Eli was gonna turn off at the fork and go on over to the end of the track to get the mail and stuff. They wasn't out a sight fifteen minutes when I heard the shootin' and I went up there. The young gent was gone and old Eli had two bullet-holes in him."

Windy felt sick.

"Oh he's dead," Pete Salter said, in answer to a question. "One of them bullets got him right through the back of the head."

As he turned away Windy saw Nyeland Grubb talking to a group of men. He could see the wide disbelief on their faces, and the nervous whispering of those who were standing close. Windy knew that Grubb was passing the word that the M&M's new muleskinner was the legendary Harvey Rouleaux.

It would be nice for Grubb, Windy thought bitterly, *if he could arrange to have a lynch mob take care of the man who's hunting him!*

CHAPTER THREE

A Fighting Man for Lucy

WINDY went back to the office at the big barn and sat there, thinking. He had met a lot of men in his time; had had a chance to see more than one over the sights of a gun. A man learns to judge character that way, and he'd judged Harvey Rouleaux. The young gunman wasn't the kind to shoot an old man in the back of the head.

Still, there was that smouldering Southern temper in Rouleaux, and there was a driving anger that had made him track his quarry for three years, if the stories were to be believed. It was hard to know what to expect of such a man.

Those who knew Eli Uhl were used to his endless prating, but to a man whose nerves lay as close to the skin as Harvey Rouleaux's it could easily become an irritant thing that could work away like the drip of water on an upturned bucket, and in time it might make such a man slash out in a crazy rage.

Windy looked around the room and saw the well-padded chair that was shaped to old Eli's body. There was the yellow slicker, unused since early last spring. And the gnarled manzanita cane, the red bark cut away to expose twisting serpents of white wood.

He'd give him a half-hour more, Windy figured. For of one thing Windy was sure. He and Harvey Rouleaux both knew each other, in the way that counts with fighting men. Rouleaux would know that Windy was waiting here for an explanation. If he didn't come within a half-hour it would mean that he was out there someplace waiting for Windy to find him.

The night ticked on, and in the stable the mules pawed impatiently and rattled halter chains against empty mangers. After a while Windy went there and forked them down some hay. After that he saddled a rangy sorrel that nickered joyfully when he came near. From the office he took a .30-30 carbine and shoved it into the saddle scabbard. He checked his twin six-shooters carefully before mounting and riding into the night. No one saw him leave.

He had waited his half-hour, and Harvey Rouleaux had not come. Any quarrel that was between Rouleaux and Grubb was forgotten now. In time, Windy knew, he would have to come back and settle with Grubb and with Wiley Peters and Ben Traub. But at the moment these things, as close as they were, had no part in his scheme. He had waited and Rouleaux had not come. Now Windy had a man to kill.

It was a night that crackled with dryness and the stars stood out from the blue-black sky. There was no breeze, and the silver

point of the Dog Star glittered against the dustiness of the sage. Sounds carried far.

Suddenly he reined in the sorrel. Over to the left where the shadows wedged apart two low-lying peaks, a quartet of coyotes had been vigorously busy with their senseless gibberish. Now they had stopped, and the unmistakable roar of gunfire filled the empty spaces.

There was no way of telling the distance, and Windy wasn't even sure of the direction. When he finally urged the sorrel off the trail to cut across the flat that lead to the upheavel of boulders at the foot of Tejon Mesa, he was still not sure. A half-hour later, when he stopped again, the gunshots were gone and the coyotes, behind him now, had resumed their off-pitch obligato.

But that gunfire he had heard had not been any farmer protecting his chicken pen from the slant-eyed, tawny marauders laughing back there on the hill. There had been more than one gun, and they had spoken with an angry, spiteful sound that had been answered in kind.

He had nearly decided to turn back toward Alamosa Canyon, when the wild shouts of men and the sudden crash of rifle-fire near at hand caused him to sink his spurs shank-deep and saw the plunging horse into the protection of the granite spires by the trail.

Then he was one point of a triangular gun-battle. A man on a lumbering animal that ran like a mule had come riding around the shoulder of the mesa, and the moment he appeared the ambushers cut loose with a withering lattice of fire. The mule went down at the first volley. The lone rider scrambled behind the animal's body and fought back like a wild man.

Windy McCloud didn't stop to ask questions. The battle was badly out of balance and that was enough. He jerked the rifle free from its saddle scabbard and started pegging away at the gun-flashes there on the hillside.

The ambushers' fire swung first to him, then back to the lone rider. The firing died, flared up again, split now as the ambushers tried to cover both sides. Soon it concentrated on Windy, making him change position, but by this time the lone rider had worked his way around to the ambusher's flank. A yelp in the darkness proved he had found a target. It sounded like a hit.

The advantage the bushwhackers had first possessed was now gone, and their spirit went with it. They were trapped in the point of a V by the fire of Windy McCloud and their intended victim. Discouraged, they backed away. The creak of their saddle leather was plainly audible. Then there was a drum of hooves, and for a second they were outlined against the rim of the hill. Six riders in the night.

Windy McCloud loosed three harmless shots in their direction, stood up then, shoved the rifle back in the scabbard and called into the darkness. "You can come out from behind that mule, stranger. Looks like your friends don't want to play any more."

He walked down the trail, his horse's reins looped over his arm. He expected to see a leathery, work-hardened rancher step out to greet him and offer his thanks. Instead, he found himself staring into the twin barrels of Harvey Rouleaux's guns.

The boy said, "I reckon you're looking for me, McCloud. So I'll talk to you like this, if you don't mind. Maybe you'll listen better this way."

ROULEAUX said simply, "It was Ben Traub shot Eli. He was waiting there in the canyon and got him with a rifle. It was the same way he killed the girl's father. He bragged to me about it on the way up from Mexico."

The young gunman flipped the guns back into his holsters. He stood there close and the whites of his eyes were visable in the darkness. He finished softly, "That's all I got to say, McCloud. If you still want me, I'm ready."

The pulse was pounding slowly in Windy's temples. He was remembering how many times he had seen Ben Traub with a rifle in the crook of his arm. . . . That, then, was the way old Matthew had died. Riding along, head down, deep in thought, alone with his worries. Struck down from behind by a man who didn't have the guts to show himself in the open. Windy did not answer Rouleaux's challenge. He turned and stepped into his saddle.

"Thanks," he said softly, reining the sorrel around. "I'll take over from here on out. I made a promise to Matt."

"You made a promise about Ben Traub,

maybe," Harvey Rouleaux said. His voice was soft and vicious. "But Traub works for Nyeland Grubb, and that deals me in. I been looking for Grubb for three years, and now that I've found him I'm not letting a redheaded Texan spoil my play."

Windy hesitated just a second, then he kicked his foot out of the stirrup. "Okay," he said. "We'll make it that way. Swing up behind."

Except for Harvey Rouleaux's telling Windy how he had tracked Traub and Peters after they killed Eli Uhl, back there in the canyon, the two men had little to say on the ride back. "I got Peters about an hour back," Rouleaux said. "Then five more riders came in and Traub got away. They'd 'a' had me here if you hadn't showed up."

After that they said nothing.

They were two killing machines, and each man respected the thoughts of the other. At times Windy could feel the young gunman's breath on the back of his neck, and once, going up a steep bank, Rouleaux locked his arms around the rangy redhead's middle.

They rode slowly, Windy refusing to punish the sorrel under his double load. The sun was coming up, warm on their backs, and they had cut back into the stage road when they saw the lurching Concord coming toward them. Automatically both men's hands went to their hips. Then they relaxed and their smiles were almost identical when they recognized the denim-clad blue-shirted figure there on the box. It was Lucy Menowitz.

She did a professional job of hauling the team to a stop, and sitting there with her foot propped against the brake rod Windy thought she made about as pretty a picture as he had ever seen. He had forgotten Harvey Rouleaux, riding behind him, until he felt the gunman's arm move and knew that Rouleaux had removed his hat. Still some little streak of cussedness made Windy refuse to introduce them. Maybe it was the look he saw in Lucy's eyes.

It was a look that washed out fear, worry, and sleeplessness and left a warm glow instead. Windy mumbled something about her having no business being here. "Why not?" she wanted to know. "I found out from Mr. Grubb that the head of his syndicate is waiting out at Half Way for a ride to Randsburg, and I aim to see that he knows there's a freight and stage line in existence to handle his ore."

Windy felt the sharp gouge of Harvey Rouleaux's thumb against his back and Rouleaux said, "I think you're bein' very wise, Miss Menowitz. I know the gentleman you're speakin' of is very concerned about whether or not there'll be freightin' facilities between Randsburg and the railroad."

She said, "That's the first time I've ever heard your voice, Mr. Rouleaux."

The way she said it made Windy mad. Before he could say anything Rouleaux's hand reached by him, reined the sorrel sharply, and Rouleaux's heel dug deep into the sorrel's flank. As they lurched away from the side of the stage the gunman called out, "Good luck, Miss Menowitz!"

And by the time Windy got things under control, she was lost in a fog of dust and a good hundred yards behind them. He jerked the sorrel to a stop. He half-turned in the saddle then, and with his face not two inches away from the other's he said, "Just when in the hell did you start running things?"

"Just now," said Harvey Rouleaux, "if it means keeping that girl out of town. Accordin' to my information, this is clean-up day in Randsburg. Your freight line isn't the only thing Nyeland Grubb plans on owning when J. B. Landry comes to town."

"J. B. Landry?"

"That's right," Harvey Rouleaux said. "J. B. Landry. One of the smartest minin' heads in the business and plenty of money to back up what he sets out to do. But he's interested in mines—not freight lines and drygoods stores. He doesn't give a tinker's damn who owns those things."

"And neither did you," Windy McCloud filled in. "So for a price you were going to help Mr. Grubb have a slice of the silver pie, that it?"

"That's it," said Harvey Rouleaux. "The name Nyeland Grubb didn't mean a thing to me. Now I've changed my mind, and we're wastin' a lot of time. Back in town a freight line and a couple of stores have got new owners this morning, if things went the way Grubb planned them."

"Suppose you and me go see about it," said Windy McCloud.

THEY stopped at an outlying ranch and picked up a horse for Rouleaux, and it wasn't much after nine o'clock when they rode into the stable at the edge of town. Something was up, all right. Pete Leever at the stable told them what it was. There had been an explosion last night in the back room of Wade Corbett's store. Must have been some dynamite he had back there. Wade, sleeping right up above it that way, had been killed.

Windy saw Harvey Rouleaux's lips curl away from his white teeth.

"Anything else exciting?" Windy asked softly.

"Guess you knew Grubb bought out Andry Perrin's place. Seein' as how he holds the mortgage on Corbett's—" He didn't have to finish.

They left the liveryman wondering how long he had been talking to empty space as they walked down the street, side by side. They moved a few feet apart before they came abreast of Nyeland Grubbe's office. It was Windy McCloud who fired a shot into the door, then waited for an answer.

For a good three minutes there was no answering move. Then the whine of a rifle lashed through the air and snapped the hat from Windy's head. Windy dropped to one knee and fired back at a protruding piece of cloth there at the back corner of the office. A man walked out into the open, as if he were going to cross the street. He took two steps, then fell on his face.

They made for cover then as a dozen guns concentrated their fire on the two men. From the corner of his eye Windy could see Rouleaux, bobbing and weaving, both hands streaming flame.

The next minute he saw Rouleaux spin around and fall. Windy groaned inwardly as he dropped a man who had stepped out of the shelter of Grubb's office. But the next time he looked around Rouleaux was back on his feet, although his left arm hung loosely.

They moved down the board walk, pausing to fire from behind the water barrels that stood on the corner. Then they ducked inside the nearly empty saloon. Separating, Windy and Harvey knocked panes out of the front windows and concentrated on the frame office directly across the street. Over his shoulder Windy kept up a fast conversation with the bartender and two dealers, and after what seemed to be hours of indecision these three joined the fight with shotguns.

Later, two citizens of the town came crawling out of a back room and sheepishly added their six-shooters to the gun combine that was bringing doom to Nyeland Grubb's dream of conquest. It was the signal Harvey Rouleaux and Windy McCloud had waited for. Together they stepped through the swinging doors and out into the street. The men in the barroom laid down a covering fire.

Rouleaux called out, "You might as well come out and get it, Grubb. If you don't I'll come in after you!"

Grubb came, but Ben Traub lunged out the door before him. He had a rifle, held at the hip, and he worked three shells through it before Windy's bullet caught him flat in the chest and sent him crashing backwards against the building.

By the time the smoke had cleared, Harvey Rouleaux had put four shots into Nyeland Grubb's chest. He stood there now and fired twice more into the dead body. Then he unfastened his gunbelt and let the weapon drop to the ground. After that he walked slowly back to the porch and he sat down, his head in hands.

J. B. LANDRY was a busy little man who acted as if he had both hands full of flypaper. He seemed slightly impressed by the fact that his agent, Nyeland Grubb, was dead; greatly impressed by the mining possibilities of Randsburg; and tremendously impressed by a stage and freight line that had such a capable and charming young owner.

He darted in and out of things like a dragon fly, and by late evening Windy McCloud knew that the M&M was here to stay. If need be, J. B. Landry would finance it until the Mt. Scott, Bisbee and Cedarbrook was in operation. It was a wonderful day for Lucy Menowitz, and yet every minute of it she acted as if she wanted to get away. The first chance she had, she asked Windy flatly, "Where is he?"

There wasn't much sense trying to pretend he didn't know who she meant. He said, "He hung around for a while until he got his arm patched up a little bit. Then about a half-hour ago he left town."

"Why did you let him do that?" she said, her eyes snapping. "You knew I wanted him!"

"Now wait a minute," Windy McCloud said. "I'm supposed to be raisin' you or something. You don't just go around a-wantin' men like that."

"I do," said Lucy Menowitz.

She was standing close to him and suddenly she leaned her head on his chest and started to cry. She said, "Windy, if I could just talk to him a minute! I knew it just as soon as I looked at him—"

He gave her an extra hard squeeze, snorted a little and said, "Well, give me about ten minutes head start, then follow me out the north trail."

He hit out the trail at a fast clip and just below the point he overtook Harvey Rouleaux, riding slowly, wincing some against the pain in his left arm.

They rode along together for a few minutes, then Windy said, "Going back to Mississippi?"

"Can't," Harvey Rouleaux said. "The law down that way doesn't like me any more."

"Gonna do some huntin'?" Windy said.

Harvey Rouleaux shook his head. "That's all over with, Windy. Grubb, as he called himself, was the last one."

"Then what you runnin' from?"

"Her, I guess."

"Why?"

"Not good enough."

"Hell of an excuse," said Windy McCloud, twitching his nose. "Get on back there and settle down."

"It's no use, Windy."

Windy McCloud heaved a big sigh. He said, "Well, I asked you nice." He had dropped back slightly. Harvey Rouleaux never knew what hit him when Windy's gun-barrel cracked just behind his ear.

And from a point high above the desert Windy looked back down the trail. He saw Lucy Menowitz down on her knees with Harvey Rouleaux's head cradled in her arms. He saw her lean over and kiss him on the lips, and when Harvey Rouleaux's one good arm reached up to encircle her neck Windy knew he had not lost his knack of tapping people on the head. Well, he thought, *Randsbury is no place for a damn old thirty-six year old bachelor.*

But he took one more look out over the desert, turning a dozen colors under the last brush of the sun. A little wind came up, curled through the mesquite, and rippled across the sage. It said distinctly, "Sure is pretty, ain't it Windy?"

"Sure is, Matt," Windy McCloud said.

He jumped, startled by his own voice. Then he took out his bandanna and blew his nose. When a man started talking to himself it was time to get going.

"I'M GUT-SHOOTIN' YOU, CLARENCE!"

the lean cowboy said. "Keep whinin'! Keep beggin'! Why don't you git down on your knees? The law has to ketch me before it kin hang me—and nobody's goin' to strain a gut ketchin' the man that rid the country of Banker Clarence Burton Rinker!" . . . But the laws of the northern ranges treat killers—good and bad—alike. You can't afford to miss Walt Coburn's explosive Montana cattle war novel FILL YOUR HAND OR FILL A GRAVE! in this month's thrill-jammed issue of double-barreled, double-action Western fiction.

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WESTERN MAGAZINE

By JOHN JO CARPENTER

He stopped, and stood there with his legs wide apart.

WALK SOFT—HERE COMES THE KILLER!

Law and order might come to Showalter....Only provided that Red Ahern faced a cold-blooded desperado and then forced that ruthless gunman to draw first—and shoot to kill!

ABOUT FOUR-TEN in the morning it began to rain, and Red Ahern pitched his hand into the discards and said, "Oh well, it wasn't my night." He got up, the worn leather belt and holster creaking, and yawned. One of the men at the table said, "I'll take your markers, Red. Or loan you a sawbuck." Red stretched, shaking his head.

"Quit your funnin', Clyde," he said,

heading toward the front door of the saloon.

"The damn fool is gettin' edgy," he heard Clyde say. "Now there he goes, lookin' for it."

Red opened the door. The brief flutter of rain was already dying. It had barely settled the dust. Heavy, black clouds still beat back the dawn-light. He stepped out on the plank sidewalk and hooked his thumbs in his belt and breathed in the damp, fresh air. It had an odd flavor after the tobacco-burdened atmosphere of the all-night poker game. But instead of arousing him it made him more sleepy. He yawned again. The door opened slowly behind him. He knew who it was, but caution made him swivel around.

"Now, Wingy," he said irritably.

The grizzled old one-armed man licked his lips and shook his head stubbornly. He stood there a moment, holding the swinging door open.

"Come on back inside, Red," he said. "You ain't been in one of these-here gun fights. You ain't got no business goin' up against Idaho Micklin. The sheriff will be here by seven o'clock—"

"There you go, toutin' the sheriff, Wingy," Red said, trying to keep the peevishness out of his voice. "You're a prize candidate for sheriff, Wingy! Only day before yesterday you was proddin' me for my vote, tellin' me what a no-good we got."

"Don't be a jackass," said Wingy. "He's all the law we got. Idaho won't fight no law, I don't keer how no-good it is. Idaho, he counts on an even break, and self-defense. Come back inside, Red."

"No," said Red. "An even break is all anybody's got a right to. I ain't lookin' for Idaho Micklin. He's lookin' for me."

He clumped on down the plank sidewalk, leaving the one-armed man standing in front of the saloon. A hundred yards down, on the other side of the street, a light glowed in the town's other saloon. That's where Idaho Micklin was waiting. Idaho had sent word he would wait there. Whenever Red got ready to apologize, he knew where to find Idaho. No time limit was set. That was not Idaho's way. He just said, "I'll give him a little time to apologize," and waited in the saloon.

Red hesitated across the street, biting his lip. He could see the forms of three men, slouched at the far end of the bar. He could not tell which one was Micklin. *I'm not afraid,* came the sudden thought. *Or am I? Idaho's pretty good. So am I.* It might as well be now as later. He wavered, gnawing at his lip and hitching at his pants.

Old Wingy Showalter appeared, hobbling down the sidewalk in the dark. He began talking breathlessly when he was still a dozen feet away.

"Now listen to me, Red. I wouldn't taken this trouble if I didn't set some store by you young fellers. I knowed this kentry when this-here kind of business was common enough. Well, it ain't common any more. My brother Jim, he tamed this kentry. I knowed—"

"Let me alone, Wingy," Red interrupted; but out of deference he half listened, backed up against a dark building while the enemy he had not chosen leaned against the bar across the street.

Jim Showalter had died before Red's time. He was not really Wingy's brother—just his half-brother. There was a twenty years difference in their ages. The Showalter Trail had been named for Jim, not Wingy. The Showalter Bank, no longer owned by a Showalter, had been named for Jim, not Wingy. Showalter Junction, where the U.P. loaded cattle, eight miles south of town, had been named for Jim, not Wingy.

"He was a man, my brother! A hell-raiser, a trouble-maker, a wild man for a wild kentry, Red. But, don't you see, he's dead! A man like Idaho Micklin got him, Red. I don't keer how good you are, they's always somebody a shade better. *You* ain't no hand with a gun! That rodeo trick stuff you do won't stand you no good with the likes of Idaho.

"You see, Red, it takes a certain kind of a man to be a killer. That kind of a man is needed when things is like they was here thirty years ago. But times change, the kentry fills up and changes too, and them that survive is them that will change with it. Jim didn't. A better man got him, and somebody else got that man. That's how it is, Red."

It was old Wingy's obsession; he had lived in his elder brother's shadow all his life, Red felt, and had built up this theory to compensate for the feeling of inferiority.

He had lost his arm and hurt his back in a branding-camp fire years back, and Jim Showalter had had to whip the man for him.

"I didn't ask for this," Red said.

"Don't you see, bub," Wingy pleaded, paying no attention, "Jim died broke. No brains. Me—I'm a saddle maker, a shoe cobbler. I fix things. I cain't save much cash because I don't handle much cash. But I lay by a little. You're got two arms. You could earn more, lay by more. Don't be like Jim—or try to be, because you never could be like Jim if you lived to a hundred."

Red said, "Wingy, I wonder what you'd do if the county did haul off and elect you sheriff, and you was called upon to shoot a man."

"That's different," Wingy said. "Now look at this fool row with Idaho. What started it?"

"You know what started it," Red said. "I passed the word he borried and didn't pay back. He's borried twice from me, and forgot it. A man can do that to me once, and I'll forget it, and allow he just forgot it too. But not twice."

"Ten dollars, then," Wingy said, eagerly. "Couldn't be more than that he borried, because you never had more than that."

"Ten's what it was," said Red.

Palavering had done something to him. Wingy was getting under his skin. Any idea he had had of crossing the street, of opening the door, of calling out to Idaho, "Well, here I am, but not to apologize!" had gone. He was not so sure, now, that he was unafraid. He had seen Idaho shoot. Idaho had been a peace officer down in Texas, had killed three men in a country where hard-to-kill men abounded.

Red wiped his suddenly-damp palms on his pants and said, "Ah, shut up, Wingy!" and strode on down the street.

IT WAS LIGHTER now, but still no one was awake yet, still only the two all-night saloons showed lamps. He went to the livery stable, and opened the door quietly. Ruby Foote, the stable hand, slept on a cot in the feed room. Despite Red's care, Ruby awakened and called out, "Who is it? Who's out there?"

Or perhaps he had not been sleeping at all.

"It's me," Red answered. He found a lantern, struck a match to it, rubbed a piece of char off the wick with the burning match and snapped down the globe. Ruby came across the stable, pulling his pants up over his long-handled underwear and stamping his bare feet more solidly into his cold boots.

"Now that's sense!" Ruby exclaimed, with relief. "I didn't sleep well, I laid there tossin' all night, hopin' you'd have sense enough to come get your hoss and go home. There ain't been a gunfight in this town for ten-twelve years, for God knows when."

"I'm not goin' home," said Red. "I thought I'd see about my horse. Roy'll have a fit anyway, me stayin' away the night with him."

"Oh!" said Ruby. In a moment he went on, "Don't Roy know where you are? I guess not, though. Roy wouldn't cotton to one of his hands stayin' in for a fight."

"Roy's a good man to work for," Red said, "but I guess he knows by know how far he can go tellin' me what to do and what not to do."

He fed the horse, scratched the night-dirt off its shanks with a curry-comb, and then sat in the office of the livery stable drinking coffee and talking with Ruby. Another light dash of rain came, but it passed swiftly. Ruby let the fire die out in the little two-lid office stove. They drank the last of the coffee while Ruby reminisced about Roy McArdle.

"Came to town a ten-dollar hired hand, don't you know, same as you, Red. He started out leasin' that piece of range after the bank foreclosed on Jim Showalter. I guess it was seven-eight years he leased. I remember the year he bought. Prices was all shot to hell. I believe Roy was the only man to buy land that year. I remember they was sale dodgers nailed to every tree around. I remember, Roy, he said, 'Buy low and sell high! She can't go no lower.' And she didn't! Only Roy—he never did sell."

"Roy's accumulated quite a bit of land, all clear," Red murmured absently; but he was remembering that Roy had fired Idaho Micklin. He said he wanted steady men. Roy had a definition of his own for "steady."

Suddenly Ruby dashed the back of his hand across his mouth, wiping nervously at his frayed yellow mustache.

"Red, if you're goin' after him, why don't you go after him?" he said, shrilly. "If you don't want to go home, what are you waitin' for?"

"I didn't start this," Red said. "I'm not lookin' for trouble with Idaho. All I want is ten dollars from him. I'll hang around, just in case he remembers to pay up."

Ruby's face was wet with nervous sweat. Red's own hands had gone damp again. The small office was suddenly stifling. He got up and jammed his hat down on his head.

"You see Roy gets that horse back, if —" he started to say.

Knowing it was a confession of apprehension, he caught himself before finishing the sentence. For a moment he locked eyes with old Ruby, and saw pity in them. The stablehand was one of the "philosopher's club" crew that held old Wingy Showalter for their major prophet. They were his best—perhaps his only—campaigners in his present race for sheriff. Misfits all of them, and Idaho Micklin was passing *his* time with another type of man.

Red went out. It had grown still lighter. He could look up, now, and see the curved contours of the rolling clouds. Two lights had appeared on the slope above the main trail through town. He had worked for Roy McArdle three years, and by now he knew those houses well enough to identify them from here. Mrs. Coffee was stirring in her boarding house, and Warner S. Pope, president of the Showalter Drovers' Bank, was living up to his reputation as an early riser.

There was a large sign on the wall of the livery stable, fixed there with wires driven into the adobe. Mr. Warner S. Pope had a mortgage on the livery stable, and he favored the incumbent sheriff, as did Fred Deal, the liveryman. Yet old Ruby Foote had been permitted to hang up an oilcloth sign for *his* candidate. It said, *Vote for C. T. Showalter for Sheriff. Honest. Dependable. The Poor Man's Friend.*

Red looked at the sign, wondering what was wrong with it. It came to him with inexplicable clarity—an odd feeling to find himself looking at the back side of his own thoughts. He knew a man did this when he was near death. But he knew why Ruby's well-meant sign would win no votes.

"Men don't like to think they're poor," he decided. "A man lookin' at that sign will say, 'Well, I reckon the poor folks will go for old Wingy, but me—I just had a little run of bad luck this year. Next year things will be different!' Wingy ought to figger out the kind of a sign that will make folks think they'll all be Mr. Warner S. Popes if he gets elected."

He pulled the bottom wires loose and tore off the last line and wired the sign down again. It now read, *Vote for C. T. Showalter for Sheriff. Honest. Dependable.* Nodding his satisfatcion, Red rolled the torn-off oilcloth into a little cylinder. He went back and opened the door and pitched it in toward the astonished Ruby.

"Here, Ruby," he said. "This is an up-and-comin' country where there ain't no poor folks. Didn't you ever hear Mr. Pope make that speech of his?"

"Hey, you tore my sign!" Ruby complained.

Red nodded.

"I just learned something about human nature," he said, "but dogged if I know what good it does me."

He went back toward town, walking slowly. He heard Ruby come out, and after a moment call after him, "I guess that is better, Red. I wonder how come?" He did not answer. He could not have answered. That odd little moment when he had looked at the back of his own thoughts was only a moment, and it was gone now.

Mist was hanging in the air, and mechanically his hand dropped to the carved wooden handle of his .45. The gun was damp, he would have to bake it dry and oil it when he got home. His muscles tensed as the question of whether he would ever get home stabbed through him. He waited a moment, striding along woodenly, until the tension went out. Again he let his hand drop to the gun. This time his fingers folded around the butt and he threw the gun out of its holster, cuddling it against the right side of his abdomen.

It was a slow draw, and he knew it was a slow draw. It would not place in the money at any rodeo. He dropped the gun back in its holster and looked around the street. No one had seen him. He had felt this same tension before rodeo shooting matches, when money or a new saddle—not life—was at stake. It had cost him

money and several saddles, before he had learned to control it. Poise did it. A man who was tense was afraid, and a man with poise was not afraid.

He remembered suddenly the first time he had placed in the money in a shooting match. He had had a couple of drinks first, against all advice, since it was a well-known fact that he could not carry liquor. But it did something to his nerves, if not to his shooting-eye. He had lost his fear of losing. He had come out into the arena, swinging his right arm around at arm's length like a baseball pitcher, not caring who saw him.

"What are you doin', Red?" someone had asked. "Tryin' to drive the blood to your fingertips? That's just superstition."

"I'm tryin' to warm up the old bone, is all," he had whooped, as though this were the funniest thing in the world. "Meat's so warm it tingles, but there's a zero streak right down the marrow."

"Ah, you're tryin' to get the blood down to your fingertips," the other had answered. "It don't mean a thing!"

"I let my blood go where it pleases," Red had answered. "For all I know, I pump mine backwards. Say—that cold streak's gone!"

He had placed second, winning fifteen dollars and a pair of wool blankets and a ham and a bottle of horse liniment and six red kerchiefs. He placed low in the target stuff, because the targets danced all over, thanks to those two drinks of whiskey. In the quick-draw competition he had outshot everyone with points to spare.

He wished he could whirl his arm around that way now, but somehow he was sure the cold streak would not respond as it had then.

SUDDENLY HE CROSSED the street and paced down to the saloon where Idaho Micklin was waiting and peered through the window. Idaho was in his early forties. He was growing bald, and he was careless about shaving. In the last year or so he talked little because there were so few people left to talk to. He was over average height, round-shouldered. In youth he might have been handsome, with a strong nose and high cheekbones and a firm mouth, but the mouth had begun to pull down at one corner over some bad teeth, and the eyes were perpetually narrowed.

"There's a dirty, trouble-making loafer!" said a voice at Red's side.

He turned around and said, "Why, hello, Roy. Is somebody sick?"

McArdle was a few years older than Idaho Micklin, and balder, but he looked younger. He was blond, ruddy from the sun, and he kept in clean clothes whether he had time to shave or not.

"I knowed you was up to something when you didn't come home," he said. "Taken me quite a while to ration it out, but I did. You ain't a drinkin' man, I said to myself, and you have to turn your girl back by eleven—and besides, you weren't dressed to go girlin'. It added up to Idaho."

It was so typically, seriously Roy McArdle that Red grinned stiffly. He said, "What good did you reckon you could do, Roy?" Roy took him by the left arm and said, "I cain't let a good foreman get himself shot up. Go get that horse and get to hell home, Red."

Red shook his head. "No, Roy," he murmured, and Roy let go of his elbow, backed away a step or two.

"Are you going to go in there and pull a gun on somebody that's killed three men?" he said after a moment.

"No. I'm not lookin' for him. I'm just stickin' around in case he's lookin' for me, Roy." Roy opened his mouth to say something, but Red went on quickly: "You're strong for law and order. All right—why don't you go tell it to Idaho?"

"Because he don't work for me, and you do," said Roy. "And besides, he's past talk. He's figgered this out a long time ago. Red, I don't say you did wrong to let it out he four-flushed on his debts, but you should of said it to his face, in front of people. He would of backed down. His kind always backs down. There would of been law around—or not fur off.

"This way, you give him a chance to lay for you. He knowed the sheriff would be away, and he picked this time. He'll let you draw first, and men that hate his guts will have to stand up in court and say you drawed first, and that he shot you in self defense."

"They don't have to," Red said. "They heard his dares. No, Roy, you talk like

old Wingy. You're both about ten years ahead of the country. Me and Idaho, we're betwixt and between. We're goin' to settle our differences by the old rules, but I reckon the winner will be judged by the new ones—the law and order rules. Ain't that about right?"

"You could go on home, you damn fool," said Roy.

Red looked in the window again, and nodded.

"Sure I could. He never sent me no dares before, but he would again. He'd keep on pickin' his time. Idaho likes it here. The gunmen have all died off. He's got folks thinkin' he's like old Jim Showalter. You don't kill a tradition like that—you kill the man! When he kills me—or runs me out of the country—he'll be the boss killer he always wanted to be. That's law or no law, Roy. You can have killers and law at the same time."

"I never heard you talk like this before!" Roy burst out.

"Been thinkin'," said Red. "A man can be backed into a corner he don't like and didn't choose. I tried to cipher out how to take home a whole skin. There's one way—kill my man."

"Well, Red, you're fired. I don't want any gunmen workin' for me."

Red felt anger rise in him, and he said, "You sure as hell stand by a man, Roy, I'll say that for you!" Then the anger died and he shrugged: "You better get out of the way, Roy. He seen us. I guess he's comin' out."

Roy looked through the window and saw the two men coming toward them. One stopped at the near end of the bar and leaned against it, poised on the balls of his feet. He looked tense and excited and anticipatory. The third man, the bartender, had gone behind the bar. He reached up and started to turn down the lamp, which would have reduced the odds against Red. Red rapped on the window with his ring and the bartender looked around. Red shook his head and pointed at the lamp and the bartender turned it up again.

Idaho Micklin pushed the door open with his left shoulder and came outside. He let his eyes slide over Red and down to his feet as he said, "Hello, Roy. How's things down to Soledad Creek?" Roy did not answer. Micklin shot a quick glance at him and then back at Red, saying out of the corner of his mouth, "How's things down at Soledad, I said, Roy?"

"P-pretty good, Idaho," Roy said. "H-how're things with you?"

"I'm workin' for Settleton," said Micklin. "Set's my idee of a man to work for." Suddenly his voice became a snarl. "Roy, why don't you go tend to your business, if you got any?"

Red kept his eyes on Idaho. They were less than eight feet apart. He knew Idaho would not draw at that distance. Two men—two .45's—at eight feet would mean two deaths. About thirty feet was Idaho's distance—Red had heard him say it. There was a time when Red had been as interested as anyone when Idaho told, coldly and without apparent brag, how he had killed his men in Texas.

"Down there," Idaho had said, "you keep your head or you don't live long. Why, it was just a job for me. Me and four other fellers was offered two thousand dollars to clean out this gang, see. It took just twenty-eight days, two short of a month, to do it. With two thousand to split three ways—"

"*Three* ways?" someone had said. "I thought they was five of you."

"They was, at first. We lost two damn fools, quick."

Roy had backed away a dozen steps, fumbling with the tobacco and papers in his pocket. When he had fired Idaho, he had done it the hard way. Idaho was the only man Roy had ever fired in the presence of other men. His rule was to do it privately, but he had called Idaho lazy, mean, vicious and undependable in front of four other men. He seemed to realize now what he had done.

Red said, "Roy, beat it. What did I tell you?"

He straightened his right arm, lifting it slightly, away from his body. Roy backed away another dozen steps, not quite daring to turn his back on the man he had once cursed publicly. He scuttled back out of range, and Red could see him there out of the corner of his eye. Roy's pink face was blank with amazement.

"Well, what about it?" Micklin said.

Red licked his lips and said, "Understand you got wrathy because I cautioned

Shorty Warfield not to loan you money."

"Let's cut the palaver," Micklin said gently. "Red, I told you to come here and apologize to me."

"You didn't tell me," Red said. "You may have told it, but not to me."

"Let's cut the palaver," Micklin said, not quite so gently, taking a step backward in Roy McArdle's direction.

"I was around," Red said, wondering why his lips were so stiff, "but you didn't tell me, Idaho. I waited quite a while, but all I heard was from others."

Suddenly he heard the shuffling gait that could belong only to Wingy Showalter. Coming across the street Wingy cried out, "Cut it out, there, you two! The first one of you to lift a hand gets this!"

"Wingy, get back out of the way!" Roy yelled. There was panic in his voice, but he did not move away from the building he was pressed against. "Wingy!" he shouted. "You fool, put down that danged shotgun!"

RED DARED NOT look around. He saw Idaho's five right fingers splay out away from his hip, and he half turned his body without shifting his feet. He heard Wingy gasp and grunt, heard the shuffling of his feet stop.

"Stay where you are, Wingy," said Idaho, "and put down that gun."

"You'd better put it down, Wingy," Red said, without turning around.

He heard Wingy drop the gun, and knew that the one-armed man had made the same discovery he had—the theory worked fine up to a point, but Idaho Micklin could shoot holes in their theories and in them too. Slowly Wingy withdrew, and Idaho's eyes came around to Red again.

Red began backing away. His fingers suddenly felt warm, the frigid feeling went out of his arm. He saw Micklin begin shuffling backward, too. They were both measuring the distance between them carefully, feeling for the sidewalk with careful heels. A man who tripped would provoke a shot he could not respond to, and the man who did *not* trip would be right when he said, afterward, "I thought he went for his gun."

He stopped and stood there with his legs wide apart, his hands away from his sides a good six inches, the heavy gun swinging at the inside of his hip. Micklin stopped too, and his body curved and twisted sidewise, but there was no stiffness or distortion in the movement. He was lithe and graceful, with an appearance of timing and co-ordination and perfect physical poise about him.

"Go ahead," Red said. "Pull your gun."

Idaho said nothing, and Red knew he would say nothing. Speech would detract from the snake-like attention he was giving to the business at hand. It was a job with Idaho, and he was prettty good at it. He kept his head.

"You've got your witnesses," Red said. "Pull your gun." Idaho blinked, and his eyes seemed to narrow slightly. Red flexed his right fingers, curled his left ones into a fist. "You've got your witnesses, Idaho. Why don't you shoot? You dared me to come to you and not apologize. Well, I'm here, and I ain't apologizin'. Why don't you shoot?"

Idaho blinked again. A ripple went through his frame, and again he froze. Red said more loudly, "I'll go this far, Idaho. Ordinarily I don't spread talk around about anybody. But in this case, Shorty Warfield was a friend of mine. I wouldn't let you or anybody make a chump of him."

"Do you call that an apology, Ahern?" Idaho said in a low voice.

Wingy Showalter gave a thin, horrified wail, and Red said, "Why if it comes to that, Idaho—*no, I don't call it an apology, you damned ten-dollar tinhorn!*"

He saw Idaho flinch, he saw the gunman make use of that involuntary physical reaction. It was the spark that tripped the timed mechanism in him and sent his lightning, practiced arm down for the gun it knew so well. Idaho twisted his body again until the upper half was a thin, curved profile to Red, and his arm had the shortest possible distance to fall for his gun. One of his feet turned slightly to support the new position of his body, and Red had the thousandth of a second to admire the balanced perfection of the man's body, to think and marvel at how many times he must have practiced to be that good.

He saw the black holster jump as the

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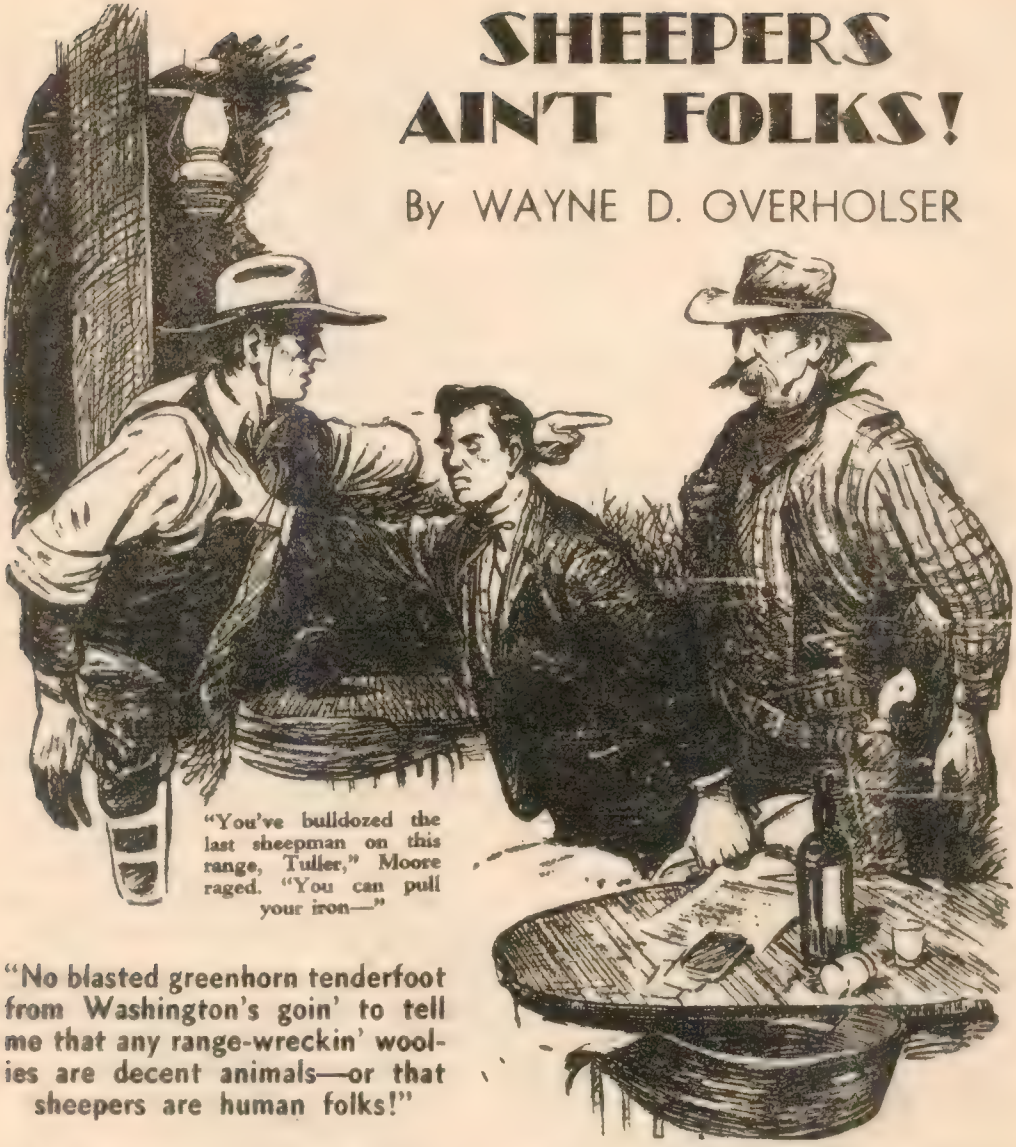
SHEEPERS AIN'T FOLKS!

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER



"You've bulldozed the last sheepman on this range, Tuller," Moore raged. "You can pull your iron—"

"No blasted greenhorn tenderfoot from Washington's goin' to tell me that any range-wreckin' woolies are decent animals—or that sheepers are human folks!"

ANYBODY around Montrose can tell you where old Horsefly Tuller lives. Maybe you've heard about Horsefly's handlebar mustache that measures twelve inches from end to end. Or you might have heard he's the champion tobacco chewer on the Uncompahgre. Or that he's the man who got the Uncompahgre Plateau set aside at a national forest. But most likely you'll be told that he's the man who heard from Teddy Roosevelt.

Forty years ago when there was talk about the national forest reserves, Horsefly Tuller owned the Circle T outfit below Montrose and ran his cattle on the plateau in the summertime. Now Horsefly never was what you'd call mean, but he was a hard man to deal with. One sheepherder made the mistake of jumping him with his gun. After that the sheepman decide Horsefly Tuller was a good man to let alone.

The business about hearing from Roosevelt started one day when Horsefly was in Donegan's saloon. He was holding forth on T. R. when the little man in the polished yellow shoes came in. Horsefly didn't see him, or pretended he didn't because he didn't want to lose his audience, namely

the barkeep, who couldn't get away.

"They used to tell me when I was a kid in Arkansas that no good could come out of Roosevelt's party," Horsefly was orating, "but by jeepers, they didn't know about Teddy. He's the greatest man that ever lived in the White House. We got to forget this two-term nonsense and keep him in there. With him as President and Pinchot as Chief Forester, we're going to get something done."

"Are you Horsefly Tuller?" The little man in the yellow shoes had stepped up to the bar.

Horsefly swung around and pinned his eyes on the little man. Like a good many six-footers, he was contemptuous of little men, and he didn't like to be interrupted. He rolled his quid into the other cheek and spat three inches in front of the right yellow toe.

"Yeah, I'm Horsefly Tuller." He turned back to the barman. "Now like I was saying before that squirt busted in, it's time we was getting some National Reserves in this country. If we don't—"

"Mr. Tuller," the little man said impatiently, "I am prepared to offer you a reasonable wage for guiding me through the Uncompahgre Plateau. I'm Jackson Poe from Washington, D. C. I'm working for the Government and this is Government business. If you will—"

This second interruption brought Horsefly's temper up a couple of notches.

"Look, you dried-up cousin to a mustard seed. I don't give a dang whether you're Jackson Poe or Poe Poe the midget." He deliberately turned his back on the little man. "I've bucked sheep about as long as I'm going to. These National Reserves are the only thing. If they work—"

Poe plucked at Horsefly's sleeve. I'm not going to stand here be insulted by you or anybody else, Tuller. I want a guide to show me the Plateau, and I've been told you know the country better than anybody else. If you are interested in having the Plateau set aside as a National Forest Reserve, you'll take the job."

Horefly turned back, intending to pick the little man up by the coat collar and the seat of his carefully pressed pants and heave him out through the front door, but the last sentence stopped him. Horsefly tongued his quid back into his other cheek and spat two inches in front of Poe's polished right toe.

"So you're from Washington. Maybe you know Teddy Roosevelt?"

"I know him very well."

"You think he's the best President we ever had?"

"I do," Poe said firmly. "If I can get some co-operation from you cattlemen, we may be able to put some of Mr. Roosevelt's conservationist theories into practice."

"So you want me to show you the Plateau," Horsefly murmured. He pulled at his mustache, studying Poe in the way he might study an undersized bull. "I guess I'd like to know why, Mister."

"We hope to set the Plateau aside as a national reserve, but I'll have to be convinced that it is worthwhile before I give such a recommendation."

"Why now, if that's what you're here for," Horsefly said, "I reckon I'm your huckleberry, but I would like to know one thing. What do you think of sheep and sheepherders?"

"I think sheepherders have to be controlled the same as cattlemen," Poe answered. "Perhaps more so, because sheep are harder on the range."

"What do you think of the danged stinking woollies?" Horsefly bellowed.

"I don't like mutton," Poe returned, "but there are some folks who do. Sheep have as much right to Goverment range as cattle."

"You think so, do you?" Horsefly howled. "Why don't you go crawl under a rock where you belong?"

Poe turned and started for the door.

"Hold on." Horsefly saw that talking to Jackson Poe was one thing, and bulldozing a sheepherder was another. "Won't take me long to get a couple of saddlers and a pack horse. Want me to get the grub?"

Jackson Poe stood up to his full height. "Let's get this straight, Tuller. If you're working for me, you'll talk to me with some courtesy, or I'll find another man."

It wasn't Horsefly's way to back down in front of man, bear or bull, but he saw that he had the choice of backing down now, or letting somebody else show Poe the Plateau who didn't know it as well as he did. That somebody else might well be the means of defeating his cherished plan of getting the Plateau set aside as a reserve. It might

even be a sheepman like Charley Moore.

So Horsefly swallowed his pride and came close to swallowing his quid at the same time.

"Yes sir," Horsefly spluttered. "I'll be so danged courteous you can scrape it off my back with a currycomb. You want me to get the grub?"

"Get all the supplies we'll need for as many days as you think it will take," Poe said crisply. "I'll meet you here in an hour if you can be ready by that time."

"Sure," Horsefly bobbed his head. "Yessir."

AFTER POE had gone, Horsefly took one more drink and winked at the barman. "Thinks sheep has as much right to the range as cattle, does he? I'll show that danged fool something about them stinking woollies and their nurses he don't know."

Horsefly was waiting in front of the saloon with the horses and supplies when Poe returned. He'd put on a corduroy suit, a stiff-brimmed hat, and a pair of spike-heeled boots that had a shine like his yellow shoes.

"Dude," Horsefly said in his mustache, and spat an inch in front of Poe's polished right toe. "Sending danged dudes out here to decide what's going to happen to this country. Too bad Teddy ain't a Democrat."

"Did you say something, Tuller?" Poe asked.

"Nary a thing," Horefly said blandly. "Just the wind passing through my mustache. Climb aboard if you're ready."

They took the Dave Wood road, and made camp that night in the shadow of Horsefly Mountain. "Named after me," Horsefly told Poe.

"Too bad," Poe said. "They make some terrible mistakes naming things in this country."

Horsefly decided he didn't like Jackson Poe. He rolled his quid to the other side of his mouth and prepared to spit. Then he changed his mind. You never could tell what'd make one of these dudes mad.

But before a week was over Horsefly altered his opinion of Poe. The little man could ride, he ate camp grub without a word of complaint, and he was grateful to Horsefly for the care he was taking in showing the Plateau. But when Horsefly tried to quiz Poe about the Government's plan, he learned little more than he already knew.

The little man could ride.

They followed a zig-zag path across the Plateau from the cedars and piñons and scrub oak of the lower altitude into the aspens and spruce on top and down the other side. Then they angled back across the top, gradually working toward the other end.

"Grass and timber's been disappearing every year," Horsefly told Poe one night when they were camped on Dry Creek. "I saw this country before the sheep got here. Why, your feet would drag in the bunchgrass when you rode through it. Now there isn't nothing but meadow grass."

Poe tossed a cottonwood limb into the fire. "You expect me to believe that, Tuller?"

"Believe it or not," Horsefly snapped. "It's the truth. If you don't fix it so the sheep are kept out, they'll eat everything right down to the roots. Might even eat the spruce trees up."

Poe laughed. "I guess it's an old feud. I'll tell you what we plan to do. We'll regulate the grazing so the timber and foliage won't be destroyed. One of our basic aims is to preserve the water supply. In other words, we're thinking of the general public as well as the stockmen. If we can keep this plateau in condition to hold back the snow water so it can be used for irrigation, we'll be of help to both you and the public."

"But the danged stinking woollies—"

Poe held up his hand. "The sheepmen are American citizens, Tuller. You cannot escape that fact. The point is we've got to control the places where they graze their bands and the number of sheep they throw on the range."

"American citizens, hell!" Horsefly spat into the fire. "It don't keep 'em from eat-

ing the range up and tromping it out so me and my kids don't get no grass for our cattle. All they think about is how many nickels they can squeeze out for themselves, not looking ahead no farther than the end of their noses. They're plumb mean, Mister. I tell you, they wouldn't even feed you if you came into one of their camps starving."

"I'm sorry, Tuller," Poe said, grinning a little. "I just can't get down to hating sheepmen like you beef boys do. If I came into one of their camps and they wouldn't feed me, maybe I'd feel differently about them."

Horsefly lay awake half the night, staring at the tall sky through the cottonwood leaves, and before he went to sleep he had an idea. It would work if the weather was accommodating, and he knew what he could expect up here in July.

Two days later they camped across a ridge from Charley Moore's sheep camp, but Poe didn't know the camp was there. After supper Horsefly gnawed off a chew of tobacco, and when it was juicing good, he said, "Guess I'll see if I can get a grouse. Kind of tired of sowbelly."

Horsefly got back after dark, laid his Winchester down, and rolled up in his blankets.

"Any luck?" Poe asked.

"Nary a bit," Horsefly said sourly. He grinned at the stars, the fire being down so Poe couldn't see him.

IT RAINED the next day just as Horsefly had hoped it would. There had been some thunder showers before, but this time the clouds really let go. The lightning ripped the sky with twinkling fiery veins, hooking up with a yellow pine here and there. Then the thunder loosed a bombardment that shook the plateau.

Before evening, Poe was thoroughly wet and cold and uncomfortable. He wasn't paying as much attention as usual to where they were going, and Horsefly took him within a quarter of a mile of their camp site of the previous night without Poe knowing it. They rode past the sheep camp, and presently came to a spring.

"Let's camp," Poe said. "I'd like to get a fire going and dry out."

Horsefly cocked his head and looked at the sky through the aspens. "Looks like we might have some good weather now. It's a couple of hours till sundown. I reckon you'll get dried out if we keep riding."

"We'll camp," Poe said sharply. "I've had enough of this for today."

But Horsefly didn't dismount. He chewed on his mustache, looking as sad as a cat with a tin mouse. "You're gonna cuss me good," he said finally, "but we've been eating faster'n I figgered we would. I aimed to get that grouse last night, but didn't have no luck."

"You mean we're out of grub?" Poe demanded.

"Well now, to put it right plain, that's the way it sizes up. We got a little bacon and some coffee. That's all."

"Ride back to the sheep camp and ask for some grub," Poe ordered. "Pay for it and add it to your bill."

Horsefly drew back his shoulders, his chest swelling like a pigeon on the strut. "I'll do anything for you within reason, Mr. Poe. I want this forest reserve to go through more than anything I ever wanted in my life, but so help me, I wouldn't ask a lousy sheepherder for grub even for you or the forest reserve. I'd starve first. Maybe I can cook up a mess of aspen bark. Or dig up a spruce root."

"All right." Poe grinned feebly. "I'll go."

"You're wasting your time," Horsefly warned. "I told you a sheepherder wouldn't let a starving man have any grub."

"We'll see. You unpack and get a fire going."

But Horsefly did neither. He stepped down, holding his grin until Poe was out of sight. Then he laughed aloud. "So he thinks sheep have as much right on the range as cattle, does he? Thinks them herders are American citizens, does he?"

Within an hour Poe was back. There was no sign of a grin on his lips now. In fact, Horsefly hadn't seen him look as angry since they'd started.

"I didn't unpack 'cause I figgered you wouldn't have any luck," Horsefly said sympathetically. "By the way you're looking, I guess I was right."

"You're right, all right," Poe said gloomily. "What do we do, eat bacon and drink coffee?"

"Hell, no. My belly is hollering for real

fodder. There's a cow camp about two, three miles ahead of us. Reckon they'll feed us. You know, cowmen are plumb different than sheep nurses."

"All right," Poe agreed sourly.

They rode into Horsefly's cow camp after dark. Horsefly didn't say it was his camp. He called out as they came in, and when a man answered, Horsefly stepped down and went ahead.

"Now don't let on you know me," he cautioned. "Treat me like I'm a stranger like this Poe feller, but go out of your way to make him feel at home."

"Sure," the cowboy answered. "I'll even go as far as to open up one of them cans of peaches you bought."

Apparently there was no suspicion on Poe's part that Horsefly was anything more than a grub-line rider. Poe was fed and dried and given a bunk, stuffed with the best breakfast he'd had since he'd left Montrose, and was turned down with hurt pride when he tried to pay.

"You see how it is with cowmen," Horsefly said as they rode out with new supplies. "Plumb friendly. Salt of the earth, cowmen are."

"Seems so," Poe agreed noncommitally.

For the life of him, Horsefly couldn't tell whether he'd succeeded or not. They finished their trip and returned to Montrose without Poe saying a word about sheep or sheepmen, and Horsefly chewed his tobacco with unusual gusto to hold back his questions.

"I want to catch the night train," Poe said as they dismounted in the livery stable. "I'll get back to the hotel and pack up. You figure out what I owe you and I'll meet you in Donegan's saloon. We'll have a drink before I go."

"That's fine," Horsefly agreed. "Haven't had my whistle wet since we left."

WHEN HORSEFLY came into the saloon, the barman called, "You'd better duck. Charley Moore's gunning for you. Seems like you—"

"Yeah, I know," Horsefly grunted, "but did you ever see me duck from a sheepherder?"

"No," the barman admitted, "but Charley is mad enough to hug a cactus."

"I'm not starting to duck now."

The barman spread his hands in a gesture of futility. "You're making the bet."

Poe came in a few minutes later. After they'd had the drink he asked, "How much do I owe you, Tuller?"

"Nary a cent," Horsefly said. "You know, I didn't like you a damn bit when we started out, but I kind of changed my mind. You go back and tell Teddy we've got to have this forest out here. Tell him we can't stand the stink of sheep, and I'll call it square."

August Novel of the Month

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"You might as well have the money. After all—"

"Nope." Horsefly raised a hand. "It's just something I want to do for the country. I figure I'll get helped out, too."

"We'll have one more drink," Poe said, "and then I've got to catch that train. I can just about promise you that you'll have the forest. Now the sheep—"

That was when Charley Moore came in, saw Horsefly, and began to curse.

"You've bulldozed the last sheepman on this range, Tuller," Moore raged.

"Don't make any trouble," Poe warned, swinging to face Moore. "I don't know what's the matter with you, but you aren't going to help your situation by trying to kill a man."

"I don't know who you are, peanut," Moore bellowed, "but Tuller came into my camp a week or so ago, told my herders that if a little runt came along asking for grub, they was to say no or he'd plug 'em between the eyes. From now on Tuller, you can stay ten miles away from my—" A light broke across Moore's face. "Say, are you the runt Tuller was talking about?"

"I'm the runt," Poe said coldly. "I guess we'll skip that last drink, Tuller."

Poe stalked out, stiff-legged, not giving Horsefly a handshake or a nod of farewell. Horsefly swallowed and grabbed the bar, his sun-puckered face going a little green. His chew of tobacco had gone down the hatch.

"You done it, Moore." Horsefly shook a fist at the sheepman. "I'm no killer, but I stopped one danged sheeper's clock, and I'll fix yours if you're not out of town by sundown."

For some reason Charley Moore lost any idea he had about pulling his iron. He was out of town and in the cedars a long time before sundown.

Horsefly stood at the bar, losing any interest he had in the filled whiskey glass that stood in front of him. He heard the screech of the locomotive as the train left Montrose. Jackson Poe was on that train, and he wouldn't be coming back. Horsefly Tuller had been given the opportunity of a lifetime, and he'd botched it. He'd had it right in his hands and he'd botched it. Why, he wasn't worthy to even mention the name of Teddy Roosevelt.

Horsefly stared gloomily across the bar into the mirror. "You're smart," he told himself. "Yes sir, Tuller, you're so smart you just plumb outsmarted yourself. When a man gets that smart, he oughtta go buy a band of sheep."

That was forty-odd years ago, and Horsefly is going strong. If you're one of those who've heard about him and want to talk to him, you can find his place up the river from town a piece. He'll be glad to talk to you, but don't try asking him any questions until he's fished out a letter, yellowed by the years and taped along the creases where the handling has broken it. He won't even hear you.

He'll read that letter, Horsefly will, in spite of anything you can do, read it in a voice that's high and trembly with emotion.

> Dear Mr. Tuller:
>
> Because of the recommendations of Mr. Jackson Poe, we will set the proper machinery in motion to designate the Uncompahgre Plateau as a National Forest Reserve. Mr. Poe spoke very highly of you and your understanding of your state and its problems. We cannot assure you that sheep will be forbidden in the reserve, but we can assure you that they will be controlled so that no great damage will be done to the grass or foliage.

"Old Teddy wrote that," Horsefly always says when he gets done reading. "See his name right there? Wrote this letter to me, danged if he didn't. Greatest man that ever lived in the White House."

Horsefly will pull on his mustache then and roll his chew of tobacco into the other cheek. "One of these days I'm going to cash in my chips. Then this letter will go to the Historical Society and I reckon they'll put it in their museum in Denver, but as long as I'm still able to kick, I wouldn't give it up for all the danged gold they've got buried in Kentucky."

Then he always turns and stares at the long flat skyline of the Plateau. "That's the Uncompahgre Plateau, stranger. It's a national forest on account of Teddy Roosevelt taking an interest in the people and what they needed."

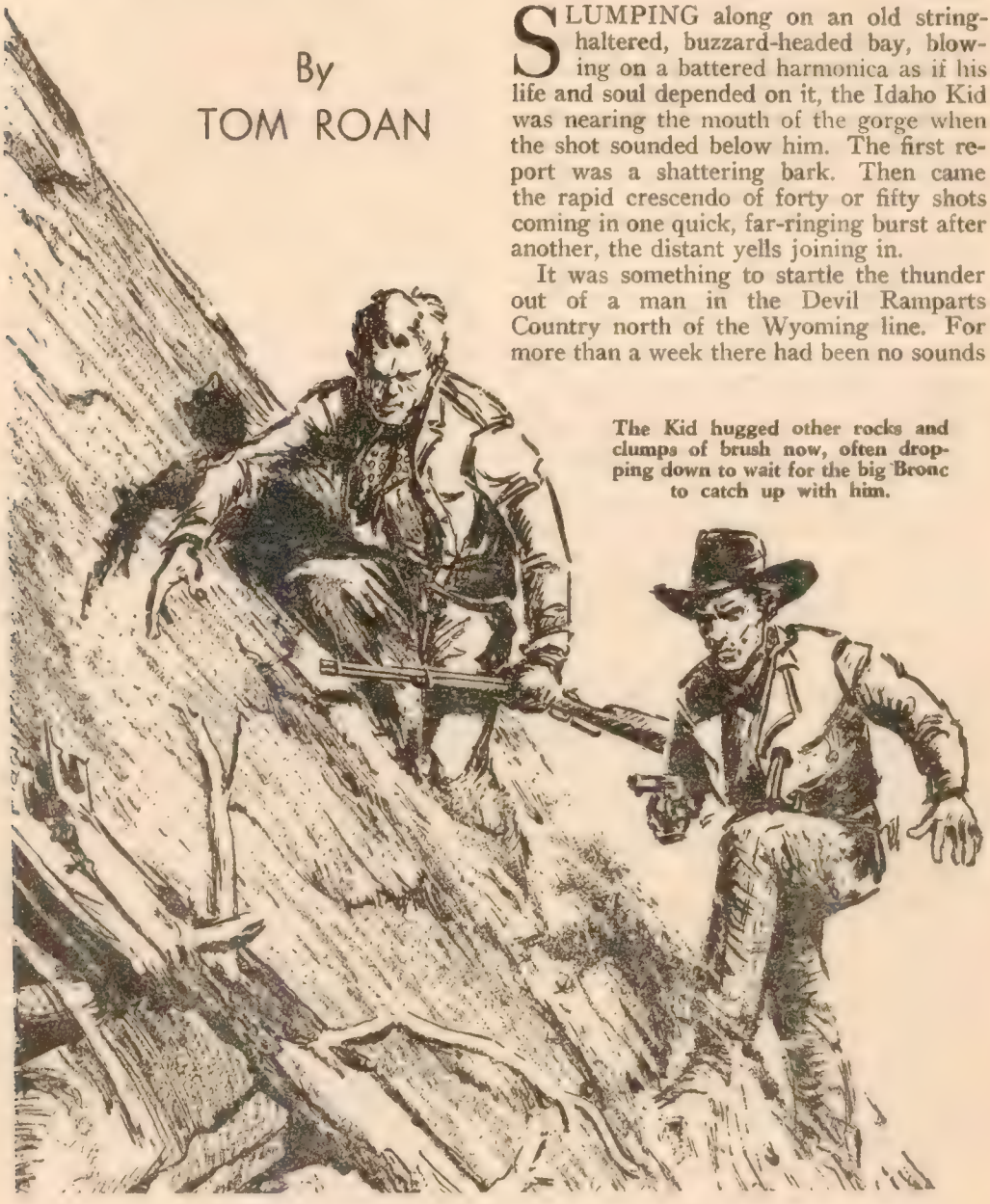
If Horsefly is in an expansive mood, he may add, "Of course, that Jackson Poe did help a little. He was a little feller, but he was too danged big to carry a grudge."

GIVE US A SMITH TO SHOOT!

By
TOM ROAN

SLUMPING along on an old string-haltered, buzzard-headed bay, blowing on a battered harmonica as if his life and soul depended on it, the Idaho Kid was nearing the mouth of the gorge when the shot sounded below him. The first report was a shattering bark. Then came the rapid crescendo of forty or fifty shots coming in one quick, far-ringing burst after another, the distant yells joining in.

It was something to startle the thunder out of a man in the Devil Ramparts Country north of the Wyoming line. For more than a week there had been no sounds



The Kid hugged other rocks and clumps of brush now, often dropping down to wait for the big Bronc to catch up with him.

The Idaho Kid, otherwise plain George Smith, rode straight into a murderous man-trap when he met those boothill lawmen in the Devil Ramparts. But there was another Smith in that hangnoose party—and two damn' Smiths make a posse!

out of the ordinary—the occasional bugling of an elk in the late-fall stillness, a flock of quail suddenly taking wing from the grass or bushes ahead of the old bay's steadily tramping hoofs. Now, still miles from the nearest town, it was as though a sudden war was being fought, the distant sounds of hoofs flying back and forth, men yelling and cursing, another furious burst of shooting, then everything so still again it was startling.

One thought struck him now: maybe a gang of hunters had come upon a grizzly. He had encountered one only an hour ago, taking six shots at it with the old .30-30 rifle swinging in its sling under his left sweat leather as the bear snorted and hog-jumped away in the brush, giving him only a fleeting glance of it for each shot. He might have made the seventh or eighth shot, but cartridges were running low, and a man who had not had a job in three months in this long drouth sweeping the country could not afford to throw his last few dollars to the wind just in order to bring down a much-prized grizzly.

Unworried yet, except for the thought that he might head into a bear with riflemen beyond it, he rounded a long, gradual bend, the walls of the gorge high at either side. Now a big canyon loomed ahead, the low trees and brush thick to his right where a wide, rushing spring of icy water as clear as crystal appeared to rush from under the edge of the willow-choked rocks.

Just beyond, it seemed that hell was suddenly falling atop of him. A rifle thundered eighty yards away, and chunks of felt flew from the tall peak of his hat.

"Get em' up, high!"

The yell was close at hand, a little old man with a straggly gray beard and a silver star on his vest popping out of the rocks and brush just to his left. "High, I tell yuh, *high!*"

"They're—high!" The Kid's answer was a yell, both hands shooting upward, the old bay coming to a stiff-legged halt. "What'n hell's the matter, anyhow!"

"Stop shootin', damn it!" Even as the Kid sat there the old man with the star had to yell to somebody in the background as a second shot crashed, filling the canyon and the mouth of the gorge with its splintering echoes. "Can't yuh see he's got his hands up!"

"Damn high time, too!" A burly black-beard of fifty now appeared, racing forward with a rifle in his hand, a six-shooter flapping at each hip, a gold-plated little star on his vest. "Oughta just ashot 'im off that hoss, countin' the break he thought he was givin' 'ol Lee Fowler! Hit ground, damn yuh, an' git ready for a rope!"

It was all too fast for a man to know what the devil was happening to him. Other men, an even dozen of them, were appearing, hurrying forward, rifles and six-shooters up and ready for the kill. It seemed only a matter of seconds before they had surrounded him, the big black-beard with the golden star ramming the muzzle of a heavy Colt in his back.

"Higher, I said!" he yelled. "Higher until we get yuh to the first good high limb, an' then the rope drag yuh the rest of the way!"

"Wait, Ira, wait!" The old man with the star came pushing in, trying to thrust the black-beard aside. "Let's not all be damn fools! We can at least give 'im a chance to talk."

Bullied here now by the big part-time deputy who turned out to be an Ira Wade, a man who immediately slapped handcuffs on him, it took time for the Idaho Kid to know exactly who these men were and what had happened to throw them into such fits. The old man with the silver star was Bob Wayne, sheriff of Deer Creek, twenty miles down the canyon. Two hundred yards away a dead man lay on the ground, and that was old Lee Fowler, Wayne's deputy for nearly twenty years.

"An' of course yuh wouldn't know 'bout the down-country stage from Tune Mesa bein' held up a few hours ago!" Wade was still bullying and pushing him back and forth. "Yuh wouldn't know 'bout twenty-two thousan' dollars taken outa the strong box an' registered mail grabbed! An' yuh wouldn't," he gave the Kid another fierce shove, "know nothin' 'bout ol' Sam Hardy, the driver, an' Bill Mason, the shotgun guard, bein' killed with nary a chance to make it a fight. Then there's Lee Fowler! Lee Fowler, I say!" He jerked his head toward the body of the man in the distance. "Yuh wouldn't know a thing 'bout him bein' shot out of his saddle just a little while ago from right here in the mouth of this gorge when we was comin' up!"

"HAVE IT your own way!" Unable to stand any more of it, the Kid lashed out with his right foot, a spurred heel catching the part-time deputy in the stomach and hurling him backward on the ground. "Just quit your slapping and cuffing me around, you damn blow-hard! If it wasn't for that badge on your chest and my hands locked in front of me—"

"Hold Ira!" yelled the sheriff. "Damn it, I never saw 'im in such a wild fool fit! He wants to kill a man before the man can open his mouth to answer a few questions! Keep back, Ira!" The old man's hand had dropped to the butt of a six-shooter. "Murder's murder any ol' way yuh look at it, an' I ain't standin' for it here!"

Now, for a few minutes at least, there was a little sense to it. Men held Ira Wade back, and the old sheriff was asking questions, one after the other, the Kid answering them as fast as they came.

"Of course I came down the gorge," he was telling them. "I heard the shooting ahead, then I ran into this. But nobody passed me coming up the gorge. I didn't see anybody, and no man could have gone past me without me seeing him. The gorge is no more than fifty yards wide for more than two miles behind me. I was shooting at a grizzly an hour or so ago, but I'm telling you I haven't seen a man since I left a sheep camp three mornings ago, up beyond Devil Drum Pass."

The story of the shooting at the grizzly was against him when one of the men swung up the muzzle of his old rifle and smelled it. The gun could have been fired right here, for the smell of the burned powder was fresh.

"An' still I kinda feel like he might be tellin' the truth," growled the sheriff. "What he says coulda been just like that, though I don't say it was."

"But he didn't see nobody goin' up the gorge!" Ira Wade was into it again, still the bold bad man ready to hang another or shoot him on the spot. "That's a dirty damn lie anybody can see through!"

"Maybe it ain't, Ira." Two tall, lean old men had ridden on into the gorge and were coming back. "There's a strip of sand up there that bears 'im out. It stretches from one wall to the other, an' the only sign of tracks is them what was left by this string-haltered bay. Yuh can see that in how hard he sets down that left hind leg. Them men who was here didn't go on up the gorge."

"Then where'n hell did they go, fly away with the birds?"

"Don't think so, Ira." The second old man was patient. "There's a break in that south wall covered with a lot of brushes an' willows, an' I think we'll find that they ducked in there, clear outa sight long 'fore this young fella had a chance to see 'em."

It was a moment's out for the Kid, but they were not through with him yet. While others rushed forward to examine the place where the water came gushing out from under the willows, he was ordered to climb back on his horse. Wade unlocked one of the cuffs, relocking it around the big nub of the saddle horn.

"An' all I'm waitin' for is to see yuh make one break to run!" He snarled the warning as he turned to swing into his own taller, longer bay's saddle. "Then I'm blastin' the hell outa yuh!"

"You can, of course!" The Kid could half-grin at him now. "I'm tied to a saddle horn and you're not!"

"Listen, fellas!" The sheriff was yelling back to them now. "Let Jim Nance load Lee's body on his saddle an' take it back to town. The rest of yuh birds come on. We've found it!"

"Get goin', yuh!" snarled Wade. "An' remember I'm watchin' yuh!"

The Kid turned his horse, following the others hurrying on into the gorge. In no time he was at the place, following the others who seemed to be forcing their horses into a solid wall covered with tangled trees. Now the way ahead was narrow, merely a hole in the foot of a tall cliff, almost dark at first, then light showing ahead. At the end of fifty or sixty yards they were swinging out into another narrow gorge, the old sheriff in the lead, leaning over his saddle horn examining the ground. In a minute he was straightening in his saddle.

"Yup," he nodded, "Charley Burke an' Doc Ford was right. They come this way, all six of 'em, boys. An' maybe now, Ira," he turned in his saddle, "yuh can unlock that cuff off the young fella. Ain't no sense in 'im ridin' like a chained mad-dog. He might be some use to us a little later on."

"Yo're sheriff, I reckon!" Wade looked as if he would fight the old man now. "I

guess that means boss, but I'd leave that cuff on."

"I said unlock it!" snapped back the old lawman, and Wade unlocked the cuff.

Now, shoved into a posse whether he liked it or not, the Kid rode on with them, heading westward up the gorge, the country high and wild above them—real outlaw country where many a wanted man had made his getaway in the past with a posse hot on his heels.

AS THEY strung along, men at either side of the Kid started loosening up with him. One man handed him the makings, something he had not had for two days now. Both kept talking, asking questions, and he was free with his answers.

"Wade, now," the man to his left lowered his voice, "is just a little too hotheaded, gets all blowed up an' excited. Liable to kill or hurt somebody bad when he does."

"Wade would like to be sheriff of Deer Crick!" The man to the right was plainer, coming straight out with his thoughts. "Ever since we left town he's been tryin' to run this show, just like he allus tries to run ever'thing. I don't like 'im, an' there ain't many that do."

Forty minutes later they were running into gunfire again. Out of the corners of his eyes the Kid noticed that Wade was one of the first to break away and head for cover. Then they were all spreading, slinging their reins right and left, their rowels raking, bullets whistling around them in a sudden hail from the head of the gorge.

"This looks like a plain try for a kill-off to me!" The man who had given the Kid the cigarette hit the rocks and brush with him, both spilling from their saddles at the same time and dragging down their rifles. "Them fellas don't act like plain outlaws. Most outlaws try to get away, shootin' as few as possible. These birds from the start ain't been nothin' but killers. Passengers on the stage said they didn't give Sam Hardy an' ol' Bill Mason the chances of snowballs in hell. Just opened up an' blasted the livin' hell outa 'em when they stopped for water."

The riflemen were above them and to the left, hidden inside a gash-like break, big rocks and brush hiding them. Down here it was mostly in the open, and soon old Bob Wayne, the sheriff, was yelling for them to fall back to better fighting ground.

But falling back here was almost impossible for the Kid and the big, sandy-haired man who had piled off his horse beside him. They had cover now. If they fell back they would be in the open for a good forty yards, and anything could happen to them in that distance.

"My old rifle will be pretty much of a back number," frowned the Kid, "if I get any farther away. I only have seven or eight cartridges left, and I'd like to make them count if I have to fight."

"Here's more, pardner." The sandy-beard grinned as he took fifteen or twenty cartridges from his belts and handed them to him. "Bronc Smith's my name, just in case yuh'd like to know."

"Thanks!" The Kid grinned as he took the cartridges. "I'm a Smith, too, just like I told the sheriff. Plain George Smith, but nobody's called me anything but Kid for the most of my life. What do you say that we get out of here and try to make the head of the gorge—go up to our right up there and get in behind those fellows?"

"It might work, Kid." Bronc Smith's face twisted into a frown. "I was sorter thinkin' of somethin' like that, but we'll have to go it on foot. Can't chance horses."

Leaving their horses in the shelter of the tall rocks, they were moving away a few minutes later, the Kid in the lead. He hugged other rocks and clumps of brush now, often dropping down to wait for the big Bronc to catch up with him until they came to a little ravine with thick brush along its rim. Now they could travel faster, at times running in a low crouch with a long six hundred yards yet to go before they would come to the big, gray cliffs at the head of the gorge.

"Damn!" Smith stopped and fell back with a cry of alarm as they tried to leave the ravine. A bullet had slapped a rock just ahead of him, dust and splinters flying. "Watch yoreself, Kid! That shot come from *behind us!*"

"Wade?"

"Wouldn't put it past 'im!" Smith dropped back into the ravine, blowing like a winded horse. "Could have been a mistake. *Maybe* it could, but we ain't takin' no more chances. We got to watch out for lead from behind as well as from ahead."

Two more bullets wailed at them when they reached the foot of the cliffs, bits of rock flying ahead of them, the bullets smashing themselves to bits as though against a steel wall. Now there could be no mistake. This was an outright bid for murder —but they had to keep going, grabbing what shelter they could until they came to a deep crack in the rocks that hid them from below.

"WE'VE GOT ol' Lee Fowler. Now the next job's to get ol' Bob Wayne. After that we can do just about as we damn well please in this country for a long time to come."

Five of the men in the break in the head of the gorge were already wanting to pull out of it. The big, dark sixth man was holding them in check, the firing careful now.

"An' maybe we woulda had 'im," the dark man was growling again, "if yuh wasn't so damn itchy on yore trigger fingers, shootin' like fools insteada waitin' to make shore of yore shots."

"But we oughta be gettin' on outa here, Bull." A tall, rusty-haired man was answering him. "Hell, there's still plenty of time to make a sneak-back an' kill that damn sheriff."

"Now's the time to get 'im, I tell yuh." The dark man turned on him with a mean glitter in his black eyes. "The country's up an' chawin' the bits. The death of a sheriff right in the middle of things will seem natural, something that they can take as a part of the rest of it."

They waited fifteen minutes more, still firing carefully, one man here, another there getting in a shot. Bullets whistled back at them, crying and slap-slapping among the rocks, but they were safe enough here, able to hold back an army of men.

And then something rattled, coming from up there on the rim of the steep, towering slope above them at their left hands. It set them back on their heels, every man looking upward, and then the crevice was suddenly filled with wild yells.

"Look out! There's a big rock a-comin' down! Run!"

They ran just in time, for a half-ton stone was plunging and bounding down the slope, starting other stones to slide and roll. In a sixty-yard dash around a bend they came to their horses. Like leaping frogs they were in their saddles, horses snorting and tearing away as another huge rock came bouncing and grinding down the slope.

"This way, boys!" The man called Bull was leading the way, and now he swung straight to his left, plunging his horse into a break in the south wall of the crevice, the others tearing along behind him. The last man was just about to get out of sight when gunfire started making the rim ring above him.

"Dink's hit!" A man started to wheel back, but bullets whistling around him changed his mind. The man behind him was already going, buckling forward in his saddle, hanging on for just a moment, and then he was falling, rooting headfirst into the shale underfoot. His horse, carrying a registered mail bag behind the cantle of the saddle, kept on going, and was soon with the others around a sharp bend.

"We at least got one of 'em, Kid." Bronc Smith could grin as he wiped the big balls of perspiration from his forehead. "Mighta got more if we'd had more big rocks we coulda rolled."

"Yes, we got one," the Kid was taking another peep below, "and here we are high and dry without our horses."

"The others can bring 'em up, an' we'll get down somehow. I'll high-sign the others below that they can come on up. But," he scowled, "I'm still a-wonderin' who fired them shots at us."

Leading the Kid's and Bronc Smith's horses, the sheriff and the others were coming up a short time later, Ira Wade now appearing to hug the background until he saw the half-conscious and desperately wounded outlaw lying there in the mouth of the crevice. Smith and the Kid were still working their way down the dangerous slope, each careful not to dislodge any rocks, when they heard the sheriff yelling at Wade.

"Don't shoot that man, Wade!" Wayne had knocked up the part-time deputy's six-shooter just in time, the weapon going off, its bullets missing the dying outlaw by less than a yard. "Damn it, that would be murder, yuh fool!"

"It was murder when they killed Sam Hardy!" For some reason Wade was like a near-maniac again. "It was murder when they killed Bill Mason an' Lee Fowler. Hell, why spend the taxpayers' money tak-

in' in a thing like that an' payin' doctor bills to get 'im well, then hang 'im? We can hold court right here!"

"Yuh can take off that badge an' get back to town, Ira." The old sheriff was mad now. "Yuh ain't the kind of a damn man I want along with me today—an' no other day if yuh wanta know how I feel! By Gawd, fella, yuh been actin' like a crazy man lately!"

"I'm sorry, Bob!" Wade was suddenly coming off his high-horse. "I—I guess I'm just nervous. I thought a lot of Sam Hardy an' Bill Mason, an' ol' Lee Fowler was like a daddy to me. Hell, I'll keep in the background from now on an' let yuh handle things." He was pleading now, for some reason intending to stick to this posse at all costs. "Yuh know how a fella feels when his best friends are killed an'—"

"Gawd, lis'en!" Every man's head came up with a jerk. The earth all around them, underfoot and above them, seemed to be trembling with an earthquake, a grinding roar filling the air, then churning, smashing, cracking and shattering as if millions of tons of glass were falling. A great puff of dust came out of the crevice where the outlaws had disappeared. With the dust came lean old Charley Burke.

"Yo're licked, Bob!" He broke into a fit of coughing. "Might—as well head back—for town. Them damn outlaws have kicked the mountain down behind 'em. Before yuh could ever see hide or hair of 'em they can be a thousan' miles away, countin' how we'll have to swing miles an' miles around."

They needed only one look to see that going on now was impossible. The outlaws had followed the crevice for five hundred yards, and then had gone up an almost impossible slope covered with shale, a deadly dangerous rock slide to be attempted by only the most daring men. Reaching the top after working their way around a long bend, they had deliberately started the slide behind them. Now as the dust lifted the slope was as bare as a hand, an impossible place for a horse to find footing.

"Yup, we're licked." Bob Wayne's old face was white with despair as he turned back. "All I reckon I can do now is to plaster the whole country with telegrams an' hope for some other sheriff to pick 'em up. Guess we might as well head for home. We'll take this shot-up duck along with us. Maybe ol' Doc Ridley can pull 'im outa it, an' then maybe we can get some talk outa him to save his neck from stretchin' rope."

EVERY MAN except Ira Wade looked sick as they headed back for the big canyon, the wounded outlaw groaning now and then as he rode in a blanket sling stretched between two of the strongest horses. Wade rode with his head up, big shoulders square, now and then humming a little hint of a tune, the others too tired and disappointed for anything as they slumped along in the saddles of their worn horses.

Night seemed to fall upon them when they struck the big canyon. Men now were scattering, the sheriff and only four more following the old cattle trail. Within an hour it seemed that it was every man for himself as they struck out for the short cuts—anything to get back to Deer Creek for a hot supper and quickly to bed.

Bronc Smith and the Idaho Kid soon found themselves paired off and getting on ahead of the most of the others. It was apparent almost at once that Bronc Smith wanted it like this. He was finally leading the way in behind a jackpined knoll at a little water hole and swinging out of his saddle.

"We're playin' out somethin', Mr. Smith." He grinned as he headed for the top of the knoll. "I've got me a hunch that this thing ain't over until us Smiths say she's done."

Dropping flat on their stomachs in the pine needles atop the knoll, they lay there waiting. A long time passed, then they heard a low sound of hoofs in the distance, and big Ira Wade appeared, riding with a tight rein, the starlight showing that it was he.

Now the mystery started unfolding. Wade rode to the top of a bald little rise and sat there for minutes listening, the picture of a man making sure that all the rest of the riders had gone on. Then he was swinging off the rise and heading westward, toward the towering wall of the canyon in the distance.

"An' us Smiths got to be a sight more careful," warned the big Bronc as they slipped quickly back to their horses and

mounted. "That critter don't mind shootin' a man any more'n yuh would a rattler."

It took an hour, for Ira Wade was no fool. He stopped several times more before entering the mouth of one of those narrow little gorges with which this entire country seemed gashed and slashed from end to end. He was gone for a few minutes, then popping back into the mouth, the wary wolf going to make certain that he was not followed.

"Figgered he'd do that," whispered Bronc Smith as they sat their horses in a thicket of pines, watching him, "but maybe I know a little more'n he'd ever suspect. Hell, I was born in this country, an' I've hunted cougar in most ever' mile of it. There he goes agin."

They followed him now, still hugging the shelter of little pines, rifles up and across their saddles, six-shooters shoved forward. This time Wade kept going, and when they reached the mouth of the gorge they caught a glimpse of him in the distance, the starlight bright here. Ten minutes later he might have spotted them had it not been for that little gold-plated star on his vest. It caught the starlight, glinting at them from the distance just as they were about to break cover from another one of those dense little thickets of low pines.

"Allus was a show-off. Little star now gives 'im away."

They saw him disappear again after a two-minute wait, then, still hugging shelter, they were coming up to one of those breaks in the south wall of the gorge. The rattle of hoofs across a shale-covered stretch of ground in the distance told them that he was going on, riding now at a fast canter.

Now they could push on, but they were still like stalking wolves hugging the darker places and avoiding the stretch of shale. In a deep, bowl-like pocket here, the rising moonlight was catching him at the end of a mile and they saw him swing in against the foot of another tall bank of dirty-gray cliffs.

"An' now," Bronc Smith could still grin, "I think I know where the gent's gonna wind up. It's tricky goin'. Have that rifle an' that ol' Colt of yores ready. The Smiths are goin' in!"

IT WAS easy to trick old fools and a simple pack of men who had done little beyond cowpunching all their lives. Ira Wade

They were still like stalking wolves.

grinned when he swung out of his saddle in the dense shadow of a cloud of old willows under another towering cliff. Gingerly now he climbed a short slope. In a moment he was poking his head into the mouth of a cave and letting go with a low, rolling whistle. Then, humming his same old tune, he moved on inside, as sure of himself as a wolf in a dark den.

Five men were waiting for him, three lanterns burning on a long, rough-plank table. Four of the men were at the table, a fifth busy at a fire beyond them, cooking a great pile of venison steaks and boiling a tall black pot of coffee. Those at the table had ripped open mail bags in front of them. Each was busy opening letters. The man called Bull was at the opposite end of the table. He looked up with a deep scowl, then grinned.

"About time my brother Ira showed up. How'd we do today?"

"Yuh lost a man, one who'll be apt to talk if he lives long enough." Ira Wade was not in the best of humor. "I'll try'n see that he don't, 'cause I reckon ol' Lee Fowler's pass-out sorter puts me up as chief deppity now. Yuh know that means sheriff when ol' Bob goes."

"An' he'll go!" Bull Wade nodded. "Damn soon. Hell, we're gonna pluck this country dry. We'll even take their eyeballs an' store-bought teeth 'fore we're done. Beats the Southwest all to thunder. Set down. Looks like we've made a fair haul in the mail bags, though I don't know what we'll do with a lot of them plain money orders. Have to burn 'em, I guess. How long yuh stayin' tonight?"

"Just a little while." Ira Wade came on to the table. "Then I'll short-cut to hell outa here, killin' a hoss if I have to get back to town in a hurry. I know my way 'round in these hills. Been studyin' 'em ever' day since I come here. Damn to hell, look at the good ol' money." He patted a big stack of it. "Now won't we buy the baby plenty of new shoes!"

"It's only a drop in the bucket to what'll come." Bull Wade grinned at him. "But don't go throwin' yore cut around like that time in Texas. That'll be a give-away right when we can't afford it."

They were there at the table for fifteen minutes, still opening mail, now and then an outlaw chuckling over something he took time to read in a letter. The man at the fire was turning to put food on the table, the others raking the mail into piles to make room for it, and then they were all startled half out of their wits by a cold voice:

"Reach high!"

"Damn!" For two seconds there had been absolute silence, then the one word came, Bull Wade snarling it from the side of his mouth. The man with the venison and the coffee stood like an iron statue in his tracks, then he was dropping steaks and coffee pot and lunging back, both hands pawing for his hips.

The first shot thundered now. The man who had dropped the food reeled back, hands coming up and clawing for his chest. He turned as if suddenly drunk, and plunged face-first to the floor, blood spouting through his fingers.

"Reach!" It was one word now, all hell ready to explode behind it, a pair of six-shooters in Bronc Smith's hands covering them, an old Colt up and ready to fire again in the right hand of the Idaho Kid. Hands that had shot upward stretched higher now, absolute amazement in the white faces around the table.

"Hell!" Ira Wade got out the word as a sob.

"He's got—the drop, boys!"

"An' us Smiths are keepin' it!" Bronc Smith's voice came back to him as hard as cracking ice. "None of yuh have the chance of a rat in hell if yuh even look like yuh wanta reach for a gun! Better start takin' their guns, Mr. Smith. Now that they look smoke-poles square in the eye it seems that most ever'body's guts has gone to yaller water. Keep up that reachin', damn yuh! We don't wanta go back to town an' say we only had to shoot one of yuh tadpoles!"

BACK IN TOWN it was long after midnight, but old Bob Wayne still sat at his shabby desk, the lamplight making his face ashen, a man sick both in body and soul, too tired and worried to even think of going to his bed. A long, carefully worded telegram that he would send in the morning lay in front of him, with it a list of every sheriff within a three-hundred mile circle of Deer Creek.

And then the old man heard horses coming up, heard them stop out front, voices muttering, men piling out of saddles. Spurred heels sounded on the porch, and the Idaho Kid pushed open the front door and came walking in. Behind him, looking like a sullen bull, though white-faced and bloodless of lip now, trailed big Ira Wade, hands behind him, another man trailing him on a rope, and another, until five men were inside. Then the old man saw Bronc Smith. Smith spoke, grinning from ear to ear.

"There's a dead 'un on a hoss outside, Bob. The money an' the mail's out there with 'im."

"An—an'," gasped the sheriff, "the one what was shot died on me 'fore I could get—could get 'im to town. What—what," he was coming out of his chair like a man in a daze, "the hell's the meanin' of it! How—how'n hell didja do it!"

"Just us Smith's!" Bronc Smith was still grinning. "Hell, Bob, there was only six of 'em, countin' purty little Ira, an' there was two whole damn Smiths of us—enough to take in a corral chuckful of killer snakes like these. They didn't show a bit of nerve atter we'd killed one of 'em."

"Two Smiths!" The sheriff fell back in his chair. "Two *whole* Smiths! Them Smiths have got a job in this sheriff's office, Bronc. But—but I still wanta know how'n hell yuh done it!"

They told him, and then walked out into the night to get some hard-earned rest. The old sheriff stared after them, a new light in his tired old eyes.

"Two damn Smiths!" he murmured. "Praise the Lord!"

"Damn you, you're lost! you're gunna get us froze to death!"

By BOB OBETS

BLIZZARD-BUSTER!

THAT WINTER, back in '98, was about the worst Texas ever saw. Up in the great bend of the Rio Grande, the big snow came in February. When old Barbecue Blaylock stuck his nose outside the saloon door to take a peek at the thermometer, the snow had turned to sleet. He came back in, shaking his head.

"Sure glad Sue Bell went over to the Circle C for a visit with the Collins girls. Two below zero, and still a-droppin'. My God, how cold you suppose it is in Amarillo?"

"Dunno," began Bandy Gillis, "but I recollect, once—"

"You recollected that twice, already," Chris Saddler reminded him. "Let's play some more poker. Somebody buy a drink. Jerusalem! How long we gonna be cooped up in this place?"

"Dunno," said Bandy Gillis, "but I wish I'd rode old Possum in. With nobody but old Casoose on the ranch to look—"

"That misbegotten slick-tail?" said Chris Saddler. "Now, if you had you a horse like my Blizzard—"

"Chris, now, Chris. You shouldn't ought to say that," murmured old Barbecue. "Here we are all coopered up as the feller says, and you boys—but speakin' of horses, I mind the time when General 'United States' Grant turned down a cool ten thousand for his old Cincinnati. How'd you like to git ten thousand for old Possum, Bandy?"

"I'd take a heap less," declared Bandy. "But just the same, I wish—"

"What you wish," Chris sneered, "is somebody would offer you a ten-spot for 'im."

"Now, you look here, Chris!" Bandy started hotly; and Chris shoved back his chair.

Old Barbecue chuckled, and winked at the two Cross Diamond boys and Fats Hardwick.

In that shrieking, lashing storm three desperate men fought a losing battle against frozen death—just so they could face an end by fire!

At that moment the front door was shoved violently open, to admit a blast of saw-toothed wind and the wool-swaddled figure of Till Tinker, the station agent.

All excited, he was stammering something about the sheriff.

* * *

It had gone like that for three days. Barbecue, Bandy and Chris Saddler had come in to get a blooded bull that Barbecue had bought in Ft. Worth. The blizzard had struck without warning, and now the new bull was next door in the livery stable. There was no hotel in Tonto, and after being confined for so long in Fats Hardwick's saloon, the men were beginning to hate the sight of one another. Old Barbecue, however, maintained a wicked good humor, billing Bandy Gillis and Chris Saddler, one against the other, as if they were a couple of edgy gamecocks.

Since the day when Barbecue's foreman had quit him to start ranching on his own, a remarkable change had come over those two young men. A change which old Barbecue had been quick to notice. But characteristically enough, that old sinner was taking his time about picking a new foreman, meanwhile finding ways to amuse himself hugely. He seemed to get a large kick out of the game.

"Chris," he would say, "you noticed how Bandy's perked up here lately? Brought in that ol' brockledy-face bull we been lookin' all over for. Taken to ridin' with steeples and a fence-tool in his saddle pocket, just a-honin' to hammer up some bob-wire. I tell you, Chris, that boy's a comer, even if it has took me a spell to notice it."

Or he would say, "Ba-à-n-dy, that there Chris is fair workin' hisself to a shadder. Got a head on his shoulders, too! Take that idea for a new camp on the Seewilla, where a man could keep watch on both them Rio Grande fords. 'Course, I ain't decided which of you young roosters to send down there. Sort of lonesome on the Seewilla, then mebbyso I'll want one of you boys for that foreman job. That is, if either of you is inter'sted. But. . . ."

They were "inter'sted" and Barbecue knew it. So in a way Barbecue hadn't minded being cooped up here by the blizzard. Moving now toward Till Tinker, he was thinking, "Pretty good boys, too. Chris, he likes pretty feathers and mebby is a mite too fond of a high-steppin' horse. While Bandy—mebby he's a mite too much on the easy-going side for handlin' men. I just dunno—but I got to find out right soon."

HE DEMANDED, "What you a-cluckin' about, Till? You know blame well the sheriff's up at the county seat, at Marfa. Stop wavin' that tellygram around and tell us what it says."

"It's from the sh-sh-sh. It's from the law. Frio Sh-Sh-Sh-Sha—Frio Sh-Sha-Sh-Sha—"

"What about Frio Shafter? Blame it, gimme that thing!" Barbecue grabbed the telegram. "Well, I'll be! Boys, as the feller says, the dominicker has flew the coop. Frio hafter done broke jail! Went by old Joe Tom Weatherbee's ranch, big as Ike, lookin' for young Yance and aimin' to finish the job. But—"

"I hear," put in old Doc Derricot, whose office was over the saloon, "that Yance Weatherbee is still puny. Stayin' in town, so he can get medical attention. That slug of Shafter's nipped his lung, damned near finished him."

"Yeah," said Barbecue, "so when Yance wasn't to home to git hisself killed, Frio pistol-whupped old Joe Tom, took his best horse and is headin' for the Border. Joe Tom Weatherbee, he rode the other way—to town, to tell the sheriff. Which was the first that county-fed shoat knew about the jail-break, him likely roundsidin' by that nice warm stove in the Paisano Saloon. Which means Frio Shafter ought to be past here pretty soon, travelin' south'rds, as the feller says. So which of you fellers wants to be the he-ro?"

"Not me," said Chris Saddler. "Not in this blizzard."

"I dunno," said Bandy. "But I feel sorry for that horse Frio stole."

Barbecue looked from one to the other, a wicked and calculating gleam in his squinted eyes.

"Well, I ain't told you all of it. Sheriff wants a posse from here to head him off. And old Joe Tom Weatherbee has got his hackles up. He's offerin' five hundred dollars for Frio's hide, whole or pulverized, as the feller says. Be a nice chance for some young rooster to git hisself a stake."

"Or a coffin," said Chris Saddler. "Frio

tried to kill Yance, just because Yance made a remark about the way Frio was breakin' some of old Joe Tom's horses."

"Then," said Bandy, "Frio broke jail, so he could finish the job on Yance. Nuh-uh. Not me! I wouldn't go after him for ten time that five hundred, bad as I need the money. But a man that'd mistreat a horse—"

"I'm disappointed in you, Bandy," old Barbecue declared. "Disappointed in both of you. I thought—now, who in hell's hinges is this else a-comin'?"

Outside, somebody had come across the wooden walk, was fumbling with the door latch. Doc Derricot, nearest to the door, opened it. A bundled and sleet-covered figure, shoved by the icy wind, stumbled past his reaching arms, swayed and fell.

"Casoose!" Barbecue exclaimed, squatting beside his Mexican ranch cook. "Do something, Doc! We left Casoose to home by hisself. Sue Bell went over to Collins'. Rest of the boys is scattered around in camps. Mebby Sue Bell tried to git home. Mebby somethin's happened to her."

"I doubt it," said the doctor, after a swift examination. "From the smell, I'd say something's happened to Casoose's whiskey jug. Be a few minutes before he can talk, though, because his jaws are literally frozen stiff."

"Why, that damned old *pelicano*!" Relief made Barbecue bellow. "At it ag'in! This time I'll fire him, sure as God made little green apples!"

"Seems like," murmured Doc Derricot, "I've heard that tune before. . . ."

Bandy, with a thought for the horse that had brought Casoose to town, put on his mackinaw and went outside. When he came back in, Casoose was sitting up, pleading so eloquently with Barbecue Blaylock that tears were running down his leathery brown cheeks.

"Wan more *tragito*, Barbecue. Wan more drink, before you want me for friz to death."

"Friz, damn you," Barbecue growled.

"You, Casoose," said Bandy. "That blaze-faced sorrel. Flanks all bloody, been near rode to death! Any man rode old Possum like that—what you doin' on Joe Tom Weatherbee's Sunday horse, anyhow?"

"A man," said old Casoose. "Was headin' for south, like docks in winter-time, and he says to me, 'Casoose, you swap for me the horse you ridin'. You swap or I am killin' you.' So I say, 'Yes, Señor Frio, I am tickle for swap heem! You take this Possum horse, and this old Messican man—"

"*Possum*? Did you say—Possum?" Bandy's words came from between his teeth. "You let Frio Shafter have my horse. So help me, I ought to kill you!"

Bandy wheeled, went behind the bar, and buckled on his six-shooter.

"You crazy brown babboon, how far out of town did you meet him?"

"She was a little piece. Two-three mile."

"You'll never catch him," declared Chris Saddler. "Not on that coon-foot you rode in from the ranch."

"No," said Bandy, "I'm going to ride Blizzard."

"*What*? Ride my horse? Well, now this *is* gettin' funny!"

"I'm going to ride him," Bandy said. "I could use that money. I'll split with you, Chris, if I catch Frio Shafter. I've got a gun. Don't try to stop me."

"Damn you, Bandy!"

Chris Saddler stood there, cursing him but not moving. Bandy reached around and opened the door and backed through it.

Old Barbecue murmured, "O' course, you could stop him, Chris. Or try. You got a gun, there behind the bar."

"Damn him, Chris said, "I'll settle with him, later! He might kill my horse. But out there in that stuff—why a man might freeze plumb to death."

"Wan more drink, Barbecue," old Casoose started pleading again. "Miss Sue Bells, she come home. She take my jog and hide it—"

"What?" Barbecue shouted. "Sue Bell come home? And you left her all by herself, with Frio Shafter sure to stop by there? Great thunder and lightnin'! Big balls of it!"

He ran around behind the bar, found his heavy wool-lined packet and began wrestling with it, trying to get his arms in.

"Wait," said Chris Saddler. "That's different. I'm going with you, Barbecue."

THEY CAUGHT up with Bandy Gillis at Arroyo Seco. This was simply a deep wash, dug out by flood waters from the

Cuesta del Burros, but now it was filled with ice-crusted snow.

"Get outta the way!" Chris Saddler yelled. "I'll show you how to break a trail across there!"

Chris kicked home the spurs and sent the dun lunging into the arroyo.

The dun didn't like it. He stopped in the head-deep snow and flung his head from side to side, breathing in the feathery stuff, frightened. Chris hauled on the reins unmercifully, but the dun turned, and came out.

"Damn you, Bandy," Chris fumed. "Get off my horse and I'll show you how to go across there!"

"All right," said Bandy. "Go ahead. It's your horse."

Barbecue said nothing. He watched Chris go through the same performance, spurring Blizzard, cursing him. And then Blizzard turned and plunged back up the arroyo bank.

"Well," Bandy said, "you made a start."

And then old Barbecue witnessed as pretty a piece of horsemanship as a man would ever see.

Bandy Gillis sent the dun easy-like down into the snow-filled arroyo. Bandy kept talking to the dun, encouraging him, leaning forward and stroking his neck with a mittened hand. At just the proper moment, he nudged him with the spurs and the dun lunged ahead, breasting into the banked snow and gaining a few feet; whereupon Bandy, not hurrying it, allowed the dun to edge back and blow for a minute, before he sent the horse forward again.

Chris Saddler, up on the bank, kept shouting caustic advice. With only a few feet left to go, he cursed Bandy.

"Damn your sorry soul, now gig him! Feed him the spurs! For God's sake, you gunna spend all night!"

Bandy got down off the dun and broke through the remaining wall of snow, himself. Then he led the dun up the south bank. Barbecue and Chris had an easy crossing.

The night was young, about eight o'clock, Barbecue guessed. The temperature was below zero, and still dropping. The wind was growing in fury, moaning and howling like a thing alive. Its icy fingers clawed under Barbecue's garments and gloves and muffler. Chris Saddler was shouting.

"We'll never make it! Frio Shafter won't get through, neither. We better go back."

Barbecue shook his head slowly; his muscles were stiffening. He spurred his horse ahead, sending him after the dun that Bandy Gillis was riding.

The swirling blackness deepened; Barbecue could not make out the shape of Bandy Gillis, or his horse, just ahead. He let Crockett have a free rein; and with his thoughts beginning to run slow, he wondered if Bandy was going in the right direction.

And the thought came to Barbecue that Bandy did not know about Sue Bell. Bandy had been in the livery stable, saddling Blizzard for this ride, when Casoose told about Sue Bell coming home. Bandy was making this ride, because he couldn't bear the thought of a fellow like Frio Shafter mistreating old Possum. Chris was here because he wanted Sue Bell, and the prestige and the financial backing that would go along with her.

Nothing wrong in a young man's wanting those things. And Chris had initiative and confidence in himself. He was a man who would always take the bull by the horns. While Bandy—

Chris Saddler had spurred up beside Bandy, was shouting at him.

"Damn you, you're lost! You're gunna get us froze to death!"

"You don't have to follow me, Chris."

"What you think, Barbecue?" Chris snarled above the wind. "I figure Sombrero Peak is 'way over to the right."

Barbecue didn't know, so he shook his head.

"Sombrero's straight ahead," Bandy said.

Chris followed, still cursing. Old Barbecue, bringing up the rear now, thought, "Bandy can't be sure. Nobody could, in this stuff. But I'll follow him."

The whine of the wind was a constant and terrifying sound. It came from every direction, until it seemed to get inside a man's head; and the hard-driven snow was like a smothering blanket.

Chris Saddler got a bit panicky. He spurred his horse into a stumbling run then pulled up and waited for them. Stout Blizzard was beginning to falter, but the dun Bandy rode forged steadily ahead.

It seemed to Barbecue that this was the

longest ride of his life. And it was growing colder. His old bones no longer ached, and when he slapped his face with his gloved hands he could feel no pain, no sensation of any kind.

Someone seemed to be shaking him. . . . Voice. . . . Sounded like Bandy's voice. . . .

"Barbecue! Barbecue! Nearly home, Barbecue! Take a dolly welty on yo' nerve, old-timer!"

SUE BELL looked frightened when she saw them coming through the kitchen door. Barbecue, his arms lifting, croaked, "Daughter, are you—?"

"She's all right, Barbecue," said a voice, soft and sardonic. "She's fine. Fed me, warmed me. Now, which of you gents is gunna let me borry a horse? One I'm on—your old Possum, Bandy—is plumb out."

Frio Shafter stood close against the wall, near the back door. His dark, lean face and dark eyes, both, somehow were bitter and mocking and smiling. His ungloved hand held a six-shooter.

"Frio!" old Barbecue said hoarsely. "If you've harmed my girl—"

"Yeah," said Chris Saddler. "Damn you, Frio!"

Surprisingly, Bandy ordered, "Shut up, Chris. You can see she's not harmed. How about my horse, Frio?"

"I'm sorry, Bandy, but I was in a hurry. Had to bloody him up a little. Guess you saw him out in the barn. Wasn't no other horses there, except Miss Sue Bell's Spanish pony. So which will it be? I've got to have one."

"Our horses," Barbecue declared, "is all beat out. Why my old Crockett it so tuckered I had to git down an' push him into the barn! Never was wuth shucks for heavy ridin', anyhow. Sort of tenderfooted an' short-winded."

"Yeah," Chris Saddler growled. "Damn you, Frio—"

"Enough of that stuff!" Frio Shafter said sharply. "Bandy, you know horses. You fellers just rode in from Tonto, but I rode twenty miles farther than that. Got five more fast ones to go! So what horse had I better take? Unless you want me to punish old Possum, some more."

"Take Saddler's horse," Bandy told him. "Take Blizzard."

"Say!" Chris Saddler exclaimed angrily. "Damn you, Bandy! I've got a mind—"

"Some day, Chris," Frio Shafter broke in softly, "that 'damn you' stuff is gunna get you in trouble. Thanks for the advice, Bandy. I'll take Blizzard."

And he was gone, and Chris Saddler stood staring at Bandy, with his hands knotted and an ugly look in his eyes.

"Bandy," he started again, "I've got a mind—"

"Some other time," Bandy said. "Wish we hadn't left those horses saddled, but we did. We had to get Barbecue inside the house. Chris, Frio Shafter is ridin' south on your horse, right now."

"Yeah," Chris snarled, "thanks to you!"

Bandy had his mackinaw buttoned back up, was pulling on his mittens. He went on talking, as if Chris Saddler hadn't spoken.

"Our hands were stiff, and he had the drop on us. We couldn't stop him. But we can catch him. The shape Blizzard's—anyhow, that dun or Crockett, either, can catch Blizzard, tonight. You want to try?"

"Go back out in that storm? Even Blizzard's not worth it! Besides you're going to pay for him. You can bank on that!"

"All right, Chris," Bandy said. "I guess it was my fault. I'll get him back, if I can. A man like Frio, usin' his spurs on old Possum—I can't stand the thought of him mishandlin' any good horse!"

"No!" growled old Barbecue, as the door closed behind Bandy. "Nor I can't stand the thought of goin' back out there and gittin' my mule ears froze off. But I'm going to! Hey, Bandy! Hold on! I'm a-comin'! . . . Sue Bell! Blame it, Sue Belly, he'p me git buckled back up in this condemned grizzly bear hide!"

* * *

The rest of it was the part old Barbecue always liked to tell about. "Well, sir, you can believe it or not. But I git back out there and get astraddle of old Crockett, and the night had turned clear as a bell. And cold—great Casoose!—Santa Claus's reindeers would of done a goose-step! Stars was all brittle and glittery as glass, so I was scared something would shatter if I yelled at Bandy Gillis. I could see both of 'em—Frio Shafter, 'way ahead and usin' his

(Continued on page 96)

He hit Barclay with the right and knocked him cold on the doorstep of the cabin.

LOW MAN ON THE HANG-TREE

CHAPTER ONE

Join Up or Die!

PETER LARKIN had deep lines in his face and a solemnity which was irksome to Dave Barr. They sat in Larkin's office in the Cactus Bank and Larkin said again, "If you don't join the Combine, you'll not last six months. And I don't want you hanging around Linda, either."

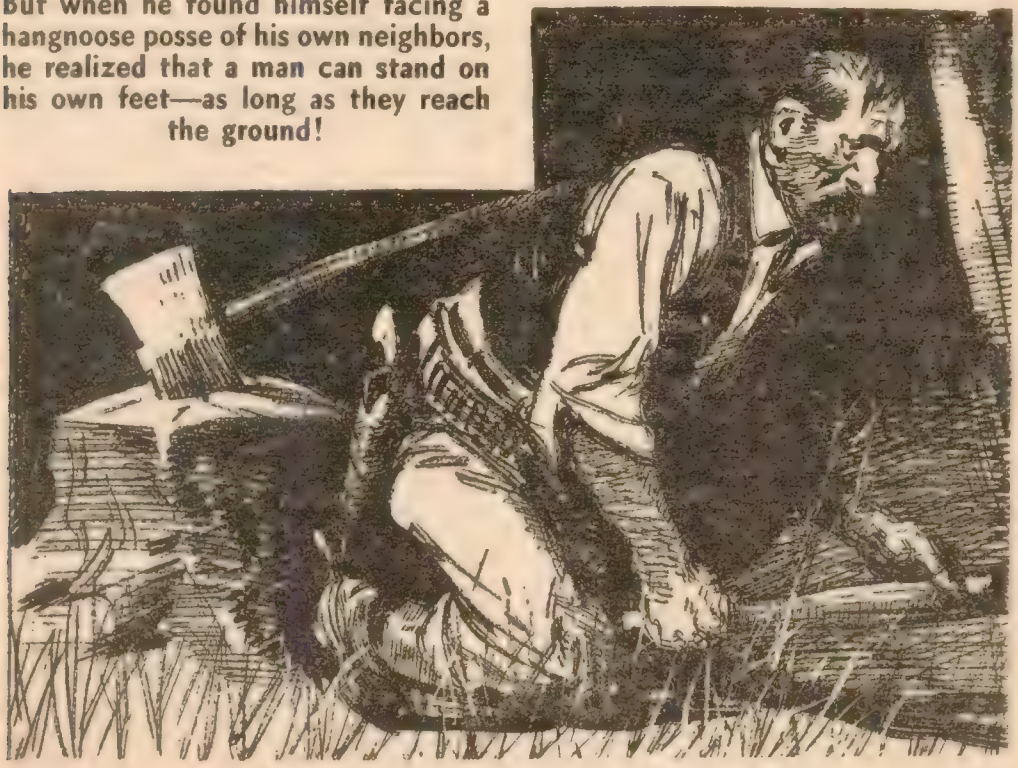
Dave Barr's lean, leathery face was not handsome. He had snapping dark eyes which were often filled with cynical amusement. He always seemed to be laughing a little at men such as Peter Larkin. He said, "Here's your two thousand dollars. Tear up the mortgage."

He handed over bills. Larkin had been pressing him for this money. He had gone down into Texas and he had returned with all that he needed to pay off the loan. Now he was anxious to get out to the Double Bar and see how old Mose was getting along with the small but fat herd of cattle he had left in the care of the Negro cowboy.

Larkin said severely, "I ought to ask you where you got this money so quick, Dave. Don't seem natural, a young feller like you goin' off, coming back in a week or so with all this money."

"Ask away," grinned Dave. "I sure ain't goin' to answer. Tear up the papers, Mr. Banker. I got me a date with your

Dave Barr didn't believe in organizing against the Eastern Company's land-hogging—he'd always fought his own battles and didn't aim to stop. But when he found himself facing a hangnoose posse of his own neighbors, he realized that a man can stand on his own feet—as long as they reach the ground!



Novel of Last-Ditch Ranchers

daughter. It's her I'll be talking to."

He reached out a long arm and took the mortgage and tore it in pieces while Larkin watched with pursed lips. The banker was a plump man, pink-skinned, bald, not bad-looking. He was a widower and beneath his penury lurked some small gay spirit. He had to smile now, at Dave Barr. He said reluctantly, "I must say, you get along, Dave. You'd do fine if you would join the combine and fight with them. The little folks are bein' run to earth by this Eastern Company. Soon enough Eastern'll buy you out at their own price, you mark my words—"

"Let Tom Mark mark your words," said Dave easily. "Eastern Company is one combine. Now you're all set on another. With Tom Mark at the head."

"Lawyer Mark is the smartest man in this country," said Larkin heatedly. "He knows how to fight the Eastern Company. We need a man like Tom Mark."

"Sure," said Dave, still grinning. "You need him. I don't." He nodded to Peter Larkin and went out of the office and across the floor of the bank, nodding to the teller and the girl clerk. He went onto the street and looked with satisfaction at the bustling activity of Cactus Town.

He had grown with the town. He had been a rider for Eastern Company when he came to this country, under Joe Small. He had been like any other rider until he met Linda Larkin.

Then he had sat in on a poker game. He still chuckled when he thought of that game, of Lawyer Tom Mark, and the others. They had thought him a saddle bum, a drifter from nowhere, with tinhorn in him. When they awoke, he had his stake.

He had taken them, then he had bought the little place at the hill's foot, re-named it Double Bar, hired old Mose and stocked up with a few head of good stock. Old Larkin had helped him in the beginning, but whether from friendliness or because he thought a saddle bum could not hang on and the bank would eventually acquire the property, Dave did not know. Larkin had certainly put the pressure on him when he refused to join the combination of ranchers in Castus County who were bent on fighting Eastern Company.

It was all pretty stupid in Dave's eyes. Eastern was owned by capital in New York, that was true. Eastern controlled nine-tenths of the grazing and most of the water. They needed a bit more water and they were always trying to buy out a small ranch or two. But what was wrong with that?

It was business, and Joe Small, foreman, had explained it to Dave long since. The diminutive cattleman had said, "I work for 'em because they pay a man what he's worth. I ain't got no ambition—except to be with good cattle. They got cattle, they got ideas about improvin' breed and land. These dumb rannies get themselves a spread and think they're little tin gods. Me, I'm safe in the arms o' the Eastern Company and I aim to stay there. Yer a fool fer leavin', Dave."

ACROSS Mesquite Street he saw the reason for his leaving Eastern. Linda Larkin wore a long, light-colored dress and carried a small parasol against the sun. She was a small girl, very slim, with tanned skin and startling blue eyes. Her hair was light blonde, falling in thick ringlets behind her small, poised head.

She was walking with Tom Mark. The lawyer, in his traditional black coat and white shirt with string tie, did not look too comfortable. He removed his black slouch hat, face stiff with disapproval, as Dave sauntered up to them. He was a handsome man with curly hair and white skin, a study in black and white always, a picturesque man, with smoky, hot eyes and a stubborn chin.

Linda said, "Lawsy me, it's the rancher. How-do, rancher." She teased all the time, with a knowing languor. She was flirtatious in the extreme, but only with men she really knew and liked, Dave had learned. She was ready now to play them off against one another, Mark and Barr, for the town to see. Dave said coolly, "Are we goin' for that ride now or later, Linda?" He had only nodded to Tom Mark, not bothering to conceal his dislike of the man.

Mark said quickly, "Later, if at all, I am sure. I wish to speak privately with Miss Linda at this time."

Dave did not take his eyes from the girl. He ignored Tom Mark as though the lawyer did not exist. He waited, still cool and slightly smiling.

Linda said, "It's so hot, Dave, I thought

later. If you don't mind. When the sun goes down a little. You *don't* mind, do you?" The eyes batted at him, the lashes fluttering.

He said, "Yeah, I reckon I mind, all right. But 'twon't do me no good, will it?"

He touched his hat and went past them. His lips still curled a little, and the impact of his short speech and departure held the two of them on the walk, staring after him, then at each other.

Tom Mark sputtered, "The impudence of that fellow! Some day he'll get his comeuppance, Linda. The man is dangerous—"

"Why, most men are dangerous if they're pushed. At least Western men," said Linda. "He was supposed to take me buggy riding. He resents my being with you. Of course he is dangerous—and very strong and brave, too." She slanted her eyes at the lawyer. They walked on, and Mark's lowering visage was not a pleasant spectacle.

In Morgan Heath's bar the air was cool and dim and a stiff drink made Dave feel a little better. Still, he had wanted badly to tell her about paying off the mortgage, to have her the first except her father to know. The bitterness stayed in him, twisting his lean, homely face. He remained alone, ignoring the advances of other ranchers who wanted to argue with him about joining the combine which Tom Mark had fathered. They shrugged away, without resentment, knowing there was something eating Dave Barr or he would have argufied right back at them.

He kept taking drinks, and pretty soon it was late in the afternoon. He went outdoors at last and walked to the livery stable. The boy said, "Tom Mark come and got the buggy. You said you wanted it early and you didn't come and git it, and then he come and did."

There was only one buggy in town. Dave's face got very hard for a moment. His right hand went to his belt and his thumb pressed hard on a cartridge in its loop. Then he chuckled, grimly, but with hard humor. He gave the boy a quarter, walked across the street and lounged, watching. In a moment there was movement in the big white house which had been built by Peter Larkin. A shade twitched, a curtain was brushed back. He saw the girl's face for just a moment before she moved away.

Well, at least she hadn't gone with Mark in the buggy. Dave went over and tapped on the door. She opened it, looked past him, saw that no buggy awaited. She said sharply, "Dave Barr, you're not to play child's tricks with me. Just because I didn't want to take a slight headache into the hot noonday sun, you get stubborn and won't take me for a ride at all. You *are* an independent fool, Dave Barr. You'll learn that man cannot live alone. You'll learn that it takes all the men of good will, fighting together, to defeat the forces that try to destroy them."

Dave said, "Linda, you're talkin' like that lawyer feller."

She flushed. "Well, what if I am? He at least knows enough to get along with his fellow men. He knows—"

Dave blurted, "Look, Linda, I paid off the mortgage today. Can't we set and talk a little? Must we stand here augerin' about Tom Mark, who has gone and hired the buggy so I couldn't get it and take you out?"

She stopped and stared at him. She was very solemn, then she giggled. She said, "Tom—got the buggy? Oh, Dave, he *is* smart, isn't he? Oh, Dave—" She laughed and laughed.

Dave said, "I see what you mean." He looked at her and she was more desirable than ever, laughing at him. He clenched his fists and fought for his temper—a battle he did not always win. He said, "I'll be goin' back to my pore little ranch, which can't interest anyone who has such clever fellers as Tom Mark on a string. When you ketch onto this hombre, and what he really is, send me a note. Or somethin'. Meantime, so-long."

He rattled his spurs going off the verandah. He had his horse at the livery stable. He went in there fast. It was late afternoon and he could eat with Mose—a pleasure, he added grimly, after the coldness of Cactus Town.

The long-legged bay took him westward. The land was fair, the air cooling and fine, but his soul rankled within him.

OLD MOSE put the panful of beans and bacon on the table, and it smelled mighty good to Dave Barr. The Negro

said, "Blue Eye been ailin', but I docteh him an' he come 'round all right." Blue Eye was the lead steer, a wise old head which had been up the trail and back twice in the old days, a longhorn of a type now slowly fading from the frontier ranches. Old Mose talked to the animal and swore it helped him tend herd.

"Mist' Mark, the lawyer-man, rid by an hour ago in a buggy fum the liv'ry stable. Jest stopped an' looked."

The fork in Dave's hand stopped halfway to his mouth. He said, "Mark was here?" He had built his house close to the main road because he liked seeing who went by west and east from town. His land ran northward, in small pastures and copses he would some day have to level, and he had good water from the Hill stream which meandered all the way down to his yard.

"Jest stopped on the road an' stared," nodded Ole Mose. "Kinda hongry look in he eye. Mist' Smart Mark, I calls him."

Dave went on eating. Beyond his place, below Eastern Company's giant ranch, lay the holdings of the Combine. Grouped about Mark's own little Double Bar were Seven Dahl's Hotspur and the places of Sleepy Twomey, Madden Jenks, Bull Barclay and some others. They were all small ranches and except for Mark and Seven Dahl, the latter a lowering, rough bully, they were no-account. They were little better than nesters and most of them had got their start by stealing from the Eastern Company. They were parasites, and Dave Barr would never ally himself with them, not if he thought the Eastern Company was wrong.

Not that he had any personal loyalty for the Eastern Company. He knew well enough that the big corporation was soulless, that if it was deemed necessary the orders would go out to clean up the Cactus country—and it would be cleaned. Joe Small was the very man to do that job. He was little and tough and game, and even friendship such as he held for Dave Barr would not stop him from carrying out orders.

Dave finished his meal and went into the little office he had built onto the end of the cabin. He put seven hundred dollars in cash into his safe, got out a battered ledger and made some entries. He was satisfied with that end of it. He was clear of debt, his little herd would double itself by next round-up. If Linda persisted in refusing him, he could wait. He had a world of confidence in his ability to wait her out and to keep her from marrying someone else.

He was getting ready to go to bed when the horses came into the yard and Seven Dahl's rough voice called, "Barr, open up. Wanta talk to ye."

He was caught with his revolver across the room. He took three quick steps and seized it. Then he realized that it would be an unfriendly act if he admitted the riders wearing the gun in his belt. He replaced it on the peg, belt and all, and threw open the front door. "Come in an' set."

They were all there—except the man he had expected to see. Seven Dahl, who was away over six feet tall, was the leader. Barclay, Jenks and Twomey had riders with them, also. It was a big party and they crowded the cabin's main living room.

There was no sight of Tom Mark.

Dave said, "Looks like you boys been havin' a meeting."

"You know we have," said Dahl heavily. He had a large nose and a hard, lantern jaw and his arms hung below his knees. He was a terrific worker. His farm-ranch was profitable mainly because of the hours he spent upon it. He was an ignorant, superstitious man. He ruled his wife and five children by brutality and terror.

"We come to tell you ye got to jine," said Dahl.

Dave shook his head. An ironic smile was on his lips. He knew it was dangerous to laugh at these people, but he could not restrain himself. "Just 'cause you got yourselves tangled with a lawyer don't mean I have to. I'd rather be hornswoggled by Eastern Company."

Dahl said deep in his thick throat, "Eastern Company's begun the dirt. My barn was burned last night."

With quick sympathy, knowing what the loss of the barn meant to this man who was part farmer, Dave said, "I'm plumb sorry, Dahl. We'll get together and raise you another."

Dahl made a violent gesture. "Won't do, Dave. We know Joe Small is yer friend. We know ye worked fer him. Ye can't come around us but one way. Jine the combination!"

"And go to war with Eastern because you think they burned your barn?" Dave shook his head. He saw the mixed terror and anger in all their faces. He said, "Lawyer Mark conned you into thinking thisaway. I don't believe Joe Small burned anybody's barn. If Joe wants you, he'll come after you in the open. Joe's that kind—I know him."

Dahl said, "Yuh heard me, Dave. Either ye jine and go with us after Small—or we got to figger yer with Eastern Company in this."

Dave said scornfully, "You never heard of a neutral? I'm stayin' out of any such fool thing. I tell you."

Dahl said thickly, "Ye're callin' us fools, now?"

Into the room from the kitchen door stepped a tall man. It hadn't occurred to Dave before now to wonder where Old Mose was. He knew, when Tom Mark appeared. Old Mose would not interfere tonight.

Mark said in quiet, rounded accents, "You see, men? Better take him out."

Dave tried to get to the gun, cursing himself for not having worn it, now. Dahl's big arm barred the way. Twomey and Bull Barclay seized him from either side. Jenks opened the front door. Mark did nothing but watch, satisfaction deep in his eyes.

There were stars and a lambent moon high over the little yard, where a tall man sat his horse, waiting. The first lunge took the three of them to its center. Then Dave had swung one man loose.

He came back in the same motion. He back-handed Seven Dahl across the lantern jaw and the big man staggered. Bull Barclay caught the next one, in the chin. He went down and rolled in the dirt, howling. Jenks aimed a kick from behind but Dave avoided it. For a moment he was free.

Mark was in the doorway with a revolver in his hand, smiling.

Dave spun, and Dahl was right on him. The big man's arm lashed out. A heavy fist caught Dave's face and knocked him headlong into the side of the house. He rebounded as Twomey threw a long one to sting his ear. Bull Barclay was up, cursing wildly, trying to get close enough to hit him some more. Dave ducked close to Dahl and plied both hands to the body of the giant, but not really close enough.

They were kicking him, punching at him. His breath came in sobs. He had very little time to inflict any damage before they would get him down and then they would kick him to death, unless he was very lucky. Already they were trying to trip him up.

He concentrated on Dahl. He hit terrible blows to the big man's body. He heard him roar, felt him give. He shifted his attack, hoping to gain a moment's surcease by dropping the leader.

His left fist hit Dahl's jaw. Barclay swung him around before he could land his right. So he hit Barclay with the right and knocked him cold on the doorstep of the cabin.

Dahl was reeling. Dave jumped and struck overhand at the shelf of the jaw. He got it home and Dahl sagged.

Mark stepped forward, coming from the side. As Dave swung to meet his next antagonist, Mark lifted the heavy Colt's revolver. He slanted it downward, striking shrewdly at Dave's skull.

The muzzle bit deep and Dave went over and down. Twomey was closest and tried to kick him, but one of the riders was in the way.

Mark said sharply, "Leave him be. The sheriff'll stand for a lot, but not murder. I've knocked out Old Mose and tied him up. Go loosen him, and we'll ride out. Our story is that Dave jumped Dahl and got a beating."

The rider who had blocked Jenks off at the last moment said satirically, "Yuh better revive Dahl afore yuh give the fight to him, hadn't yuh?"

Barclay was coming to, groaning. Dahl sat up, trying to get his bearings. Mark said harshly to the rider, "Looks to me as though you're not with us, brother."

"I ain't with no gang what picks on a man as game—and as good a scrapper—as this 'un," said the rider. He was packing a large revolver of his own. He was a young, reckless fellow, recently employed by Jenks, poorly dressed, just a drifter. He had his hand on his gun. "You better slope—all of yuh. I'll see Barr don't die. And then I'm leavin'."

"You better," said Dahl thickly. " 'Cause I'm killin' either of you on sight. Git that? You or Barr—and I'd kill him now if I had

my gun. I come here to make sure Dave—"

Mark said, "That's enough. Leave it this way. Come on, now. Let this fool do what he wants—we've accomplished what we came to do. Barr won't forget this lesson. Let's go and see Small."

THEY rode out of the yard, two of them swaying a little in the saddle. The young rider threw a bucket of water on Dave, then went around back and found Mose, his scalp slightly cut, groaning inside a tightly wound rope. He got Mose out of the rope and went back and saw Dave was arising. He called, "They're goin' after Small. Me, I'm leavin' these parts pronto. Looks like a good war—but not fer me. *Hasta la vista, señor.* You fought good."

He rode out of the yard and out of Dave Barr's life, and Dave never knew the part the young rider had played. Old Mose came staggering up and they washed each other at the pump. Indoors, Dave surveyed himself in the cracked mirror and was amazed to find how few scars represented his aches.

Old Mose said, "Who hit me, boss?"

"Your friend, Lawyer Mark," said Dave grimly.

"Them men all jump yo', boss?"

"Yep. Mark figgered I couldn't gun the crowd. It'd be wholesale murder. Most of 'em can't shoot a pistol—they're nothin' but halfway men anyhow. Lawyer Mark thought it out for 'em. Took the buggy so I wouldn't be with Linda Larkin. Figgered I'd come sashayin' out here, 'cause I been away. Smart feller, Lawyer Mark."

"On'y one thing—he kin shoot. I seen 'im shoot good, time they had the fest'val. You 'member? He shoot as good as you, boss."

"Better—at a target," said Dave. He touched his scalp where Mark had hit him. It was broken and the blood covered his fingers. Mose looked close, got scissors and began cutting the hair away. Dave said, "And he's courtin' my girl. So I can't very well shoot him, not with the country agin' me."

"Is people again' us?" Mose was genuinely surprised. He had lived in tolerance for many years, since the war which had freed him.

Dave said, "While Lawyer Mark is runnin' the Combine, folks are again' us, all right, Mose. You'll have to sleep with that old Sharps of yours at hand. Always ride a fast hoss. Never skyline yourself—live like in the war."

Mose said, "Yassuh. But is you done anything, Mist' Dave?"

"Not yet," said Dave. "Not yet, Mose. I'm aimin' to do somethin', though. Sooner or later."

Mose finished applying court plaster to the shaved scalp. Dave went outdoors to the corral and whistled for his favorite bay, and the animal came. It was the bay's habit to let Dave put the saddle on without a murmur, and then to buck, just for the hell of it. That night he felt the difference in his rider and took it out in running.

Lawyer Mark was smart and the Combine was feeling its oats, but they had not thought of Short-Cut, that perilous, narrow road around the mountain. The bay had been over it before and to Dave it was just the route he took between the Eastern Ranch and his own when he found occasion to visit Joe Small.

Still, it was shivery and a mountain goat would have gone easy on it. They came down bathed in moonlight and the time was short, at that, Dave thought. Even on the main road they would be pretty close. He set the bay across the flat land at top speed.

Joe, a little bowlegged man with a hard mouth and a toothy grin, was playing seven-up with Lanky Turner, his straw boss. He saw the bruises on Dave's face and said, "I see yuh've been at it again. Who'd yuh whup now? Hope it was that stuck-up, skinflint, crooked Tom Mark."

Dave said, "I missed him and got Seven Dahl. They're on their way here to reason with you. They got guns and whips in case yuh ain't exactly reasonable."

Joe said, "Now, do tell. Lanky, yuh better stir up some of the boys. Jest two, three good ones, you know which. . . . Do tell. Dave, they ganged up on yuh? I'll whittle 'em down some!"

"No," said Dave quietly. "Listen to them, chase them off. Tell them to go plumb to hell. But don't mention me, don't do nothin' to them atall. Leave it to me."

Joe said, "I got orders from the east—"

"Lay off, will you?" Dave begged. "Gimme a chance, Joe. I'll do what I can first. Then if you got to—carry out the orders."

Joe said, "I'm a Company man. You're not. I got orders to—"

"Remember El Paso? The Mex that had you cold when I come in? What did you say that night?" Dave's voice was soft but firm.

Joe Small fingered his bristly mustache. Finally he said, "Okay. For a while. I got confidence in yuh, Dave. It's jest that damned Lawyer Mark. He's plumb smart and I want to work him over. 'Course I got orders not to—company says not to put ourselves again' no lawyer unless I got him dead to rights."

Dave said, "They're comin' in. I'll go out the back and over Short Cut. Do like I say, Joe. I'll handle 'em my own way."

CHAPTER TWO

Haven in Hell

TWO days later in Cactus Town, Peter Larkin caressed his rotund middle and observed to his daughter, "Your young man is making no progress."

"Which young man?" asked Linda absently.

"You flirt too much. I mean the only young man you could consider. Tom Mark. He has not been able to sway Joe Small an inch. The combine will have to take steps."

"Why?"

"Seven Dahl's barn was burned," said Peter Larkin. "Small defied the committee. The Eastern Company has not answered Tom Mark's appeal by telegraph."

The girl said, "I didn't know Tom Mark had sent a message. I do know that someone beat Dave Barr. He is bruised and cut. He was in town today. I saw him."

"You sound as though a tragedy had occurred," said Larkin. "I saw him, also. He came into the bank."

She said, "He didn't come to see me."

"You are a flirt," said the banker. He smiled at her. "Tom Mark and the members of the combine beat Dave Barr. He attacked them. Dahl whipped him."

She said, "You believe that? You believe Seven Dahl whipped Dave—alone?"

"Tom Mark told me, in confidence," said Larkin. "He fears that Dave will shoot someone and wants him bound over to keep the peace. The sheriff is out of the country, chasing those thieves and Mark wants—"

Linda said, "You think Tom Mark is really afraid of Dave?"

"No," said Larkin. "But I think he is far smarter than Dave."

Linda said, "Sometimes, father—" She swung out of the room without finishing and he sat staring after her, his pink face flushed. He thought he understood her when she was flirting with the two men, playing one against the other. But at times like this he was not so sure that she was even his own daughter. . . .

She put on a bonnet. It was twilight and Cactus Town was settled into the somnolence of the after-supper hour. She walked lightly in the shadows, searching the streets for someone she could trust. She saw the huge Seven Dahl. His face was marred almost as badly as Dave's, and there was, she noted, a particularly big bruise on the long heavy chin. She nodded with satisfaction and waited in the shadow between the bank and the building next door, a hay, grain and feed store. There was an alley between them and her father's office had a side door which let into it. She felt at ease here, on familiar ground. If she could see one of the riders she knew, she would send him for Dave Barr.

It was strange how her pride had vanished, leaving her only with the anxiety to see him and talk to him, warn him against Tom Mark. It was even more peculiar how Tom Mark no longer appealed to her even as a remote possibility. He had been present when Dave Barr was beaten by those loutish ranchers. That must be it. Mark had been there and had probably taken a leading part in it.

She had a strong idea that Dave was making plans to repay in kind for what had happened. She saw her father coming down the street and went deeper into the alley. He entered the bank by the front door and in a moment a light shone out of the side exit. She was sorry she had spoken angrily to him, and reminded herself to apologize. He was just a—a banker, figuring the chances of a profit, and Dave Barr was reckless, a lobo wolf, not a safe man for a loan.

She saw Manuelo, a Mexican she sometimes hired to do jobs around the house. She left the alley, running quickly. She

cornered the little man and explained that she wanted to see Señor Dave Barr, at her house, at once. She impressed on him how urgent it was. She was shameless, playing on the tender sentimentality of the Latin youth, begging him to hurry.

She went home and waited in the parlor, the lamp turned low.

The sleepy night operator listened to the key, automatically took down a message. It was in some sort of code, he thought. He was very sleepy, not being accustomed to the new night service put on by the telegraph company. Grumbling, he stumbled into the street. *Bankers,* he thought, *are too big for their boots.* He hated banks. He never had any money to put in them, anyway.

Earlier in the evening Dave Barr had been busy. He was not certain that his method was working, but he had enthusiastically put it to the test. He drifted about Cactus Town, spotting the members of the combine who were present, accounting for them all.

He caught Sleepy Twomey first. He trailed him to the Mexican quarter and found the former sheepman dickering for a cheap bottle of liquor. He shoved Twomey against the wall with a long arm and spoke to him earnestly for some moments.

Twomey tried to get away, but Dave slapped him until he listened. When Twomey was reduced to a stupor, Dave said, "You better think it over. I'll be seein' you again. Next time I'll use my fists." He left the dazed, shaken man and went blithely in search of another victim.

He got Barclay down by the town corral. He had a little more trouble with the bull-necked man, but a half-nelson helped him to thrust Barclay's head between two rails of the corral and hold him helpless. Dave said, "This is for your own good. I could've shot you. I'm just tellin' you what to do and what not to do." He harangued Barclay.

HE LEFT the heavy-set rancher after a while and was drifting on when Madden Jenks walked right into him. He poked Madden hard in the belly, sat him down and read him the riot act he had carefully composed. He ended, "And you can't beat Eastern Company with Mark at your head. You willing to listen to reason, Jenks?"

The smallest of all the combine sighed. He said, "You sure hit harder than the others. My middle hurts! But I ain't convinced."

"I'll have to get Seven Dahl" said Dave, spitting on his hands. "He's the strongest prop beneath Mark. You men have got to listen to me or you'll lose everything you've got."

"We ain't got a hell of a lot" said Jenks philosophically. "An' Lawyer Mark has promised us plenty. You keep talkin' about the right to own our land an' work—he says we shouldn't have to work so hard."

"I know what he says" muttered Dave. "When I get my hands on him—"

He was becoming dismally certain that no man was ever convinced of anything by a punch in the nose, but he still stubbornly believed he could beat some sense into Seven Dahl. It was far better than gunning these men, who were nothing but gulls for their leader, but it was also hard on his knuckles. He breathed on the backs of his hands and was aware of a small Mexican trailing him.

He stepped into an alley, reached out, caught the Mexican and dragged him in, waving a fist under his nose. "Who sent you?"

Señorita Larkin," said the Mex simply. "I am Manuelito."

Dave's hand dropped. "What does she want?"

"Señor Barr should come. To her house. Now, at once."

Dave said, "She sent you when?"

"Just now. Li'l while."

Dave said, "I hadn't oughta go." But his feet were deciding for him. He walked down past the bank. There was no light in the office where Larkin worked at night. He went slowly onto the porch and Linda opened the door, her slight figure limned by the lamplight, a lovely small lady.

She said in a tiny voice, "Oh, Dave. I have to warn you. I—please, Dave, don't stand there. Come inside."

He went over the sill and they looked at each other. She leaned against the closed door, trembling, but eager, her face lifted. He bent forward as though in a daze and her lips were warm and soft.

She whispered, "Father is at the bank.

A telegram came for him. I sent the man down there—"

Dave said, "At the bank? There's no light."

She said, "The telegram was from the East, the man said. No light, Dave? Not in the office?"

"I just came by there," he said.

"But it was fifteen minutes ago. He would be home by now if—" Her hands gripped Dave's arms. She said, "Oh, we must go there. At once."

The fear leaped in Dave, also. He put her aside and said, "I'll go alone."

"His heart," she said. "The doctor warned him—"

She clung to him, would not stay behind. They went down the street, they never remembered how. They went to the front of the bank and it was locked. Then Dave went into the alley, the girl behind him.

The side door was open. Dave stumbled, going in. He leaped back, fishing for his six-gun, crying hoarsely, "Stick 'em up in there."

The girl was flat against the wall. Dave crouched, then moved again. He lifted a foot, put it down within the office. There was a lamp, of course. He struck a match and lit it.

He cried, "Linda! Go back."

But she was holding to the door with both hands, staring down. Her father lay with one leg propping open the door. His mouth was open, and his eyes. There was a welt alongside his brow and there was a hole in the side of his head. Two blows, from two directions, Dave saw at once. Someone had hit him, knocking him out. Then someone had hit again, with intent to kill.

Even then, in that moment of stress, Linda's voice was clear, steady. She said, "The message. Where is it?"

Dave searched. He gingerly went through Larkin's clothing. He searched the floor, the waste basket. He searched the desk.

He said, "It's gone, Linda. Please go outside."

She said, "The safe, Dave."

He went into the bank. The safe was ajar. He came back. He said, "A robber. Maybe two. They caught him off guard."

"The telegram!" she said stiffly. "We must know what was in it."

"We can learn that when the sheriff comes," said Dave. "He'll let us know."

She said, "I have a terrible feeling, Dave. I— Take me home before you call anyone. I have an awful feeling."

They went out, leaving the lamp. They went down to the white house which Peter Larkin had built, and the girl stretched out on the couch in the parlor. Dave crouched beside her, trying to soothe her. He remained there for fifteen minutes, reluctant to leave her even for a moment.

She asked him to go, finally. He went down the steps and headed for the hotel. He had to raise a committee of responsible men until the sheriff could return and take over. Cactus Town was so peaceful as a rule there was no marshal, just an old constable, who knew nothing.

He heard loud voices from the bank. He saw a familiar tall figure in a black hat. He heard Tom Mark's sonorous voice say. "Here's his rifle. And by God, we'll find the money if we find him. Let's go!"

Seven Dahl said, "Barr's the murderer, all right. He musta dropped his rifle after he hit the poor man, lost his head and run. Mebbe he's still in town."

"He better not be, or he'll stretch hemp this night," swore Bull Barclay. "We got him dead to rights now."

"Spread out and search," urged Mark. "Remember, he'll be dangerous."

They would be watching his horse. Dave faded in the shadows. He knew better than to submit to capture and attempt to prove his innocence to a mob. He retreated swiftly to the white house. There was a barn where Linda Larkin kept a fast horse he had given her last year. He slipped into the stall, found a saddle, threw it on the animal.

In a moment he was riding out, heading for his home ranch, knowing he needed time to think as well as a head start on the posse.

OLD MOSE said, "I take Blue Eye, go down south with the cattle? Whut you gwine do, Mist' Dave?"

"I just don't want them killin' my steers," said Dave. He had another rifle and plenty of ammunition. He threw some cold biscuits and salt into a package. He went on, "They'll be here pronto, Mose. Get goin'."

The aged Negro said, "Hates t' leave,

Mist' Dave. Think we could fight 'em."

"You take those cattle south, then swing them through the Pass and put them on Eastern Company land," Dave said. "We can't fight a whole town. Somebody planted my rifle where Larkin was killed. Everyone knows he'd told me not to hang around his daughter, that he was on Tom Mark's side, that he favored the combine. Everyone'll believe I'm guilty. I'm goin' to make a run for it until the sheriff gets back. Then I'll go in and stand trial. Get me a lawyer from a big town—" He was a little incoherent on that score. He went out and saddled up a black he owned, wishing he had the swift bay.

It was almost morning when he rode out. He hit for Short Cut, hoping to lose himself in the rocks. He would leave no trail there and when he left Short Cut there would be caves, he imagined. Never a man to explore unpromising land, he was not sure.

He wondered if he dared throw himself on the mercy of Joe Small, tell him the truth. If he knew what the latest orders from the east were, he would know whether that would be any good. But no one back there could possibly know of his attempt to reason with the members of the combine.

He was onto the dizzy trail before he knew it. The black was not as sure-footed as his bay and he rode cautiously, making the switch-back, narrow turns in the pitch darkness, purely by guess and by gosh. A rock rolled beneath a hoof and it was long seconds before it crashed with a faraway frightening small noise below. There was a pine gorge which would impale horse and rider upon a trunk, then there were rocky caverns too desolate and deep ever to have been explored by man—and above and around all this threaded the tiny, narrow path.

He went on, because he had to go on, but in those hours he went through a crucible. His mind was a turbulent maelstrom for a while; then by sheer force of concentration, he cleared it. He forged on, determined now to get through to the Eastern Company's ranch and have a talk with Joe Small.

There were certain things he needed to know. He was lost in a maze of contradictions now. He knew he had not committed any crime, yet he saw plainly that he had set the community against himself with his crude attempts to disorganize the combine. He saw that any smart man, seizing the reins, could command the situation, throw blame upon him and get away with it. Tom Mark was a smart man.

He thought of Linda and again his eyes blurred with the memory of her softness, her kindness. He put the black to the downward trail, longing for a moment more with the girl. He remembered her calmness, her insistence, with her father lying murdered, that they look for the telegram which might help discover the murderer.

Yes, the telegram was the key. Larkin had been killed after he'd received it. Whoever had killed him had taken the message, therefore the message was the motive for the killing. It was a hopeful thing, that the sheriff could commandeer the message. The telegram could certainly have nothing to do with Dave Barr—he knew no one in the East and had no connections there.

It did not seem possible that someone would kill Peter Larkin for a piece of flimsy. The stout banker was not a man Dave would have expected to figure in a scene of violence.

The black horse slipped and Dave dismounted. He crept ahead, feeling the sheer wall of the cliff with his hands. It was chalky, and he knew he had come almost to the end of Short Cut.

He led the horse, going silently afoot. He held his rifle in his hands. They made the last turn and came down to the shale which was the last barrier to the flat pasture land of this end of the Eastern Company's spread.

He heard the voice grunt, "There he is!" and went flat, his rifle flashing into the night as he rolled. The black cayuse bolted past him, whinnying as shots sounded ahead and to the side. He knew at once what had happened.

Again someone had used brains. Surmising that he would use the Short Cut, they had come up and ambushed him. Not all of them would be in this bunch, he knew, but his real enemy would.

He did not want to kill anyone and aimed his fire high. If the horse had not spooked, he thought, he might have got through.

He began moving, and found a loose boulder behind which he could pause. But

the shale beneath his feet was loose and uneven and he could only rest there the short space of time between them and daylight, he knew. He had two choices, he thought numbly, listening to Tom Mark give orders to the members of the combine. He could either surrender or start shooting to kill his neighbors.

He had killed men before. In a fair fight, he had shot down maybe more than his share. But he had never killed a neighbor, a rancher like himself. It had always been a shoot-out with tinhorns, or outlaws, under circumstances quite different from these.

Now he was the hunted, and of course Tom Mark would encourage them all to shoot him down like a mad dog. And if he surrendered—the rope.

It was an impossible situation. He had reloaded his rifle and was debating whether to attempt to run the gauntlet, risking everything to get to Joe Small and the Eastern riders. He heard Tom Mark's voice, exultant, saying something not quite clear.

Then he heard Joe Small. The impact of that sound stunned him, struck him down behind the boulder. Small called, "Dave! Hey, Dave. Come on out."

HE DID not answer. Joe continued, "Dave, you cain't git away. We got you. Come on in and I'll see you get a square shake."

Dave said dully, "You're with the posse, Joe?"

There was a silence. Tom Mark broke it, urging something on Joe. Small said, "Waal, in a manner of speakin'. Yuh see, Dave, I got orders."

Dave said, "Orders? About me?"

"'Bout everything," said the foreman. His voice was uneasy, but determined. "You better give up, Dave. You'll only git kilt in the fight an' so will other people. It won't do nobody no good."

Dave said, "I don't want to kill any of the ranchers."

"Then come on. I'll do whut I kin for yuh, Dave." Joe seemed unhappy, but his voice did not falter.

Dave drew a deep breath. He stood up, his hands shoulder-high, facing outward. He half-expected a bullet then as he said, "All right. I give up."

But they only took his guns. He made out Seven Dahl and then Barclay was triumphant, shouting, "Get a rope. String him up."

"Nothin' doin'," said Joe Small.

"Bring him inta his own place," Seven Dahl said sharply. "That's neither Eastern land nor ourn. Bring him in there an' decide. I say hang 'im!"

Tom Mark's voice was sharp. "There's a gun on you, Small. Don't butt in, Dahl is right. We'll go around to his place. We'll give him a regular hearing. Like the Vigilantes always do. You'll report it, Small, just as it goes off. You'll find we have enough to hang him, all right."

Joe Small said, "That's fer the sheriff. Yuh promised when I come out and got him to give up that yuh'd give him a fair trial."

"And we will. Vigilante style," said Mark. "Put him on his horse and we'll ride."

This posse consisted of the members of the combine and Joe Small, and no one else. Mark had carefully sent the others in various directions, Dave surmised, risking all on his guess that Dave would seek shelter at his old home ranch. But what had happened? What orders had Small received? Why had Joe turned on him?

He was numb, asking himself those questions over and over. He rode the horse, head bowed, altogether guilty in appearance, raking his brain for a defense against the farcical procedure which he knew was about to take place. The posse rode around Short Cut, and it was morning when they arrived at the Dave's cabin. The eyes of all were bloodshot, sunken, but not weary.

The blood-lust was upon them, altering them, Dave saw. They were little men, but in mobbing together they had gained strength. Only Joe Small held apart, and he could do nothing. Seven Dahl and the others watched him, although no one attempted to disarm the fiery little foreman. It was, Dave thought, a hopeless situation. He had as much chance now as a sparrow with a cottonmouth down by the brook. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Who Wants Power?

THEY HAD actually broken out his bacon and cooked it with some eggs from his yard hens. He sat at the end of

the room and could not touch a bite. Tom Mark was surveying him with gloating eyes. His own cynical smile had returned in this hour and he gave the lawyer back stare for stare.

Joe Small said, "I still wanta take him t' Cactus Town fer the sheriff. This here is wrong. He coulda shot some of yuh—"

Mark said, "It is not your decision, Small."

Small said, "I don't like it."

Seven Dahl and Bull Barclay moved as if at a signal. They grabbed the little foreman and held him tight. Tom Mark lifted Small's gun from its holster and said, "Better this way. Now you've got nothing to say about it. Tie up the prisoner, Dahl. Tie him up tight."

They tied Dave. They had been his neighbors and though they had bickered and he disagreed with them all, he had never thought to see the longing for his death in them. They were rough, binding his arms behind him, shoving him against the wall near the fireplace.

Mark stood, smiling easily. He said, "I scarcely need point out the facts. Peter Larkin ordered this man to remain away from his daughter. He publicly said that Barr was wrong in refusing to join our forces. Then Peter Larkin was found with his head stove in by a rifle butt and his safe robbed. The rifle found in the alley belongs to Dave Barr. The money in his saddlebags corresponded to the amount missing from the safe—"

Dave almost started out of his bonds. So they had managed to plant the stolen money on him, too! The last hope died, and only then did he realize that it had been there. Now, with sickening sureness, he knew he was as good as dead.

Seven Dahl said in his heavy voice, "I seen the rifle and I seen the money. Took it out o' his bags myself. He done it, all right."

Mark said, "Barr was away for a while, then came back. He brought money with him. Everyone knows about the stage holdup and that the sheriff is away looking for the thieves right now. Barr took advantage of that to rob the bank, neither knowing or caring whether Larkin would come in and catch him, as he meant to do away with Larkin anyhow."

Seven Dahl brooded over his bruised chin. He said to Dave, "You got anything to say to that? Not that I kin see what you *would* say."

Dave said, "Only that it ain't true."

Joe Small said in flat accents, "Better think of somethin' else, Dave."

"I was away, all right. I was in El Paso in a gambling house," said Dave, deliberately staring at Joe Small. The little foreman hung his head.

Dave went on, "I think you all know I play pretty fair poker. I was a gambler once. I went down and won me enough to pay off my mortgage. Given time, I c'n prove that. I'm known in El Paso."

"That's true," said Joe Small. "He's known there. He's got a good rep."

Mark spread his hands. He said, "And that proves he did not kill Peter Larkin with the rifle we found bloodied in the alley? Nor steal the money he had placed in his saddlebags?"

Dave snapped, "If I did that, why didn't I ride on out of town?"

"I am too much of a gentleman," said Mark loftily, "to mention the name of a lady under these circumstances. Suffice it to say that you know where you went, and how you attempted to persuade this girl to flee with you. It is obvious that you saw yourself forced by the organization of your neighbors to leave these parts. You chose to commit a crime to aid you in so doing. You will pay the penalty for that crime now—as soon as a jury of your peers decides your guilt!"

The lawyer was enjoying himself, running his lynch court. Joe Small was helpless, and this part puzzled Dave more than any. He simply could not understand what orders from his company would keep the little man from saving a friend's life. Even in the midst of his quickened fear the thing lingered—it wasn't right, it wasn't according to Hoyle. He glanced at Small, and the foreman's face was miserable.

Mark said, "I will count the votes. All in favor of pronouncing this man guilty of murder in the first degre, say 'aye'."

The response was instant, not thunderous, merely steady. Seven Dahl arose. Mark said, "Contrary, 'no'."

"No," said Joe Small.

Mark smiled in a superior manner. "The ayes have it."

Joe Small said stubbornly, "Yuh can't

hang a man so long as one of the jury holds out. That's law an' you know it, Mark."

"This is no jury trial," said Mark loftily. "This is Vigilante work, quick, neat, efficient. Although I practise law, I hold the courts are sometimes cumbersome and slow."

Joe Small said, "Yuh might practise the law, but yo're wrong this time. Everyone here knows it ain't right. Yuh said yuh'd give him a trial—all yuh did was accuse the man, then take a vote. Waal, I still think thar's room fer doubt."

Mark's voice rose. "You are in no position to dispute the decision of this jury, Small."

"Yuh got my gun," the foreman admitted. "But that don't say I can't auger. Dahl, yuh know I'm right. Barclay, Twomey—"

The meekest of them all spoke suddenly. Madden Jenks said, "Yup. I know yo're right. I hold with Small. I ain't fer hangin' no man outer hand."

Small's voice mounted, "Where do you say you was at when this here robbin' and killin' was goin' on, Dave?"

"I don't know what time it took place," said Dave. "But I was sure seein' some of the hombres in this room, leastways part of the night. Then Manuelito, that li'l Mexican feller, he gave me a message—Say! He kin tell where I was and where I went. Seems like I never *was* alone long enough to do what Mark says I did." His mind was working clearly again and he gained confidence. "If you hold me fer the sheriff, it'll gimme time to prove I'm innocent. I know it. I was with one of the other of you-all right here, doggone it!"

The ranchers looked at each other. They looked away, uneasily, then at Mark. The lawyer said scornfully, "A likely tale! How could he have been with you men, his sworn enemies?"

Bull Barclay cleared his throat. Then he said stubbornly, if reluctantly, "He was tryin' t' convince us. That's really all."

"Convince you of what?"

Barclay said, "That we shouldn't try to make war on Eastern. That if we worked with Eastern, Joe Small would give us an even shake."

Madden Jenks said, "Yup. An' also that lawyers has mush in their mouths."

Mark said, "Here, here! What is this? Jenks, what do you mean by that?" His brow was fierce, his flashing eyes challenged them. He had dominated them for so long he felt absolute power over the small ranchers of the Cactus country. "By God, sir, I've worked and slaved for you men, trying to bring order, trying to make Small here and his bosses know your strength—"

He worked it up, waving his arms. He was an orator and he knew how to spellbind an audience. He was easily carried away by his own words, Dave thought gloomily, but the trouble was he carried men like Seven Dahl with him. His peroration filled the room with sound. If much of it signified nothing, neither was there an answer to his mouthings. Truth, Dave felt, could not prevail against such screaming of the eagle.

But even Mark had to stop. And then it was Joe Small in his quiet, stubborn way, saying, "Waal, mebbe some jigger planted the money in Dave's saddlebag and put his rifle in the alley. Don't seem reasonable t' me a feller like Dave'd leave a rifle behind. No matter how much hurry he was in to make a *pasear*, he'd sure take his gun along. Quicker'n money bags, I reckon."

"I tell you he probably dropped it in the dark and couldn't pick it up quickly enough," Mark snapped.

Now they all stared at him and it was obvious he had made an error. None of these outdoor men could conceive of such a thing. Mark, a good revolver shot, was notoriously not a rifleman. He had said a stupid thing and he opened his mouth to correct it, recognizing at once that he was wrong.

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IN THAT one second the tide turned just a bit. Joe Small knew it. He opened and closed his right hand, the gun hand.

Dave Barr knew it. He moved his back along the wall. He had been thinking about this thing for some time now, so he went ahead and took a chance and did it. He moved his back and he turned his head.

In the back of the house there was the barn. It was a small barn, with the doors half open. Between the doors there was a black, woolly poll. An unwinking eye stared in the dimness of the early morning. It was Old Mose, who had been knocked out and tied up there. He was up now, and Dave knew it was only a matter of time before the husky Negro got free.

Joe Small's face was blank, but his eyes were half-closed, fixed upon Dave. Mark was talking, haranguing them. Seven Dahl's mouth was beginning to go slack under the oratory, but the others were restless and Barclay put the coil of rope down on the floor by the settee in the corner.

Seven Dahl went over and picked up the rope. Mark was demanding instant hanging for the miscreant. The others milled for just an instant.

Suddenly, in the front, hoofs clacked, striking a stone. A figure flashed into view. Dave Barr, already about to make a desperate motion, leaped for the doorway. Joe Small, ahead of him because he was nearest, threw open the door. The ranchers, aroused now by action, shouted. Dave slammed the door behind him and made for the slim rider in the yard.

Linda Larkin slid down from the bay pony and cried, "I got it . . . Oh, Dave, they've tied you up! I've got it, Dave—the message!"

Joe Small's Barlow slashed at the ropes, cut loose Dave's arms. He said, "Hosses. Ride like hell. Come back when sheriff's in town."

Dave snapped, "You can't go back, Joe. Mark'll kill yuh—"

Then Mose was coming with the horses, one for himself, one for Dave. The bay circled, whinnying at sight of Dave, returning, shaking the bridle. The girl cried, "The message, Dave— It says—"

Mose's old Sharps spoke from under his arm and a horse jumped sideways. There was a shout from the house and the door slammed. Then window glass tinkled and Dave swore—that glass was precious.

Joe said, "I'll reason with 'em—and I want my ole gun." He turned and started to walk back to the house. Helpless, unarmed, Dave yelled a warning.

There was a single revolver shot, then the Sharps crashed again. But Dave was leaping, picking up the little man on the ground. Mose kept the horses steady. Linda, pale as a ghost now, mounted a grey on a run. Mose clambered aboard a pinto, the Sharps reloaded and ready.

Dave put the little foreman across the pommel of the bay's saddle and vaulted up behind. The corner of the barn protected them as they rode.

He had to get a gun now, he knew with a terrible calmness. He had to get a gun and go back and kill Tom Mark. For it had surely been a revolver shot which killed Joe Small, and none of the others would have, could have, fired it.

* * *

They paused up the creek. Mose nursed the big buffalo gun, covering the back trail. On the bank of the stream, Joe Small opened his eyes. He said, "Tough. I was allus tough . . . but this time I'm checkin' out. . . . I done wrong, Dave. Them orders . . . they was ratty."

Dave said, "I don't get it, pardner."

The little man breathed lightly. The bullet was in his body, through to the left shoulder blade. It was a miracle that he had lived this far, Dave knew. Small said, "They wasn't—on the square, pal. The comp'ny shouldn't play no game like that. . . ."

Linda brought water, moistening the hard little face. She said tightly, "I know. It was in that telegram. *Tom Mark is working for Eastern Company.* They hired him. They wired father that he was to co-operate with Tom. It was sort of in code, but I could see what it meant."

Joe nodded. "Didn't know it m'self until yestiddy. Got a letter. Mark's usin' them poor suckers. He's goin' to sell 'em down river. Eastern will take over. . . . I shouldn't of let yuh give up to 'em, Dave. I was—mixed up in my haid, I reckon."

He had never pleaded in his life before, but he was pleading now, Dave realized. On his knees, his heart sad and heavy, Dave said, "Why, you never knew Mark'd do murder, Joe. How could you know?

Why golly, Joe, you only hurt your own self, you didn't hurt me any."

The little foreman said, "Allus goin' by my orders . . . Mebbe . . . mebbe I'd done better . . . work up a small spread . . . do a li'l farmin' . . . raise some good Hereford stock. . . ." His head drooped. There was a little smile beneath the sandy mustache.

Linda said, "He—he died, didn't he Dave? The little man is dead." Her voice was hushed.

Dave got up. The muscles of his jaw were working; his eyes were moist and sunken in his leathery face. He said, "Give me that rifle, Mose. I'm goin' back there. In a hurry."

Linda cried, "Dave! You can't. There's too many of them."

He said, "Mark is the only one I want." His face was hard.

"But Dave," she begged. "They'll kill you. I—You'll leave me all alone, Dave."

He held the heavy-barreled gun in his hands. He said icily, "Better be alone than livin' with a coward. Mark killed your father to keep him from tellin' what was in that telegram. He killed Joe because Joe was my friend and he was scared Joe would tell me about the letter namin' him an Eastern man. If we let Mark go on, he'll hide all the evidence and doublecross every man, woman and child in Cactus County—and wind up top dog, maybe Governor, who knows? He's jest the kind does that—winds up a big success with all his mistakes buried in some boothill. No, Linda, I'd rather go back and let 'em try to kill me."

He went on, "Furthermore, he'll be after you. And he'll kill you, Linda. He heard you say that you had the message. You called it out as you rode up. He ain't one to stick at killin' a woman."

"Yes," she breathed. "I know you're right. Oh, darling—" She ran to the bay horse. She yanked at Dave's own saddlebag. She came back triumphantly, holding a long-barreled, single-action Colt's Frontier Model revolver. She said, "Take this, too. It was father's."

He said, "What a woman!" The grin returned to him. His face grew lighter, his brow cleared. He said, "Mose, you keep the Sharps, after all. Stay here with Linda."

THEY STARED at him and he saw that wouldn't do. Mose said, "Mist' Dave, you aim to die alone?"

He said, "All right, come along. They'll be outa the house now, ready to start after us. Be careful."

They rode back to the ranch, came up at the rear of the barn. They could hear the noise of the posse arguing. They heard Jenks say, stubborn as a mule, "I still don't see why Mark hadda shoot Joe Small in the back."

Seven Dahl roared, "He was aidin' and abettin' the escape of the killer, that mizzable Dave Barr. The cause of all our troubles. . . ."

Tom Mark's voice was so harsh it grated. He said, "Jenks, if you want to go home, I think you should leave now."

"An' turn my back on you?" Jenks was emphatic. "I ain't aimin' to chase no woman, an' I'm beginning to think—"

Mark said dangerously, "That's the second time today you've dared to suggest something detrimental to my character, sir."

"I ain't fightin' no duel, so don't fancy-talk me," Jenks said flatly. "There is things I don't like atall. Mebbe a man kin get sense beat inta his head. Dave Barr talks plainer'n you, Tom Mark—"

Dave said, "This is it. Here we go!"

He sent Mose around one end of the barn with the potent old Sharps rifle. He came walking slowly around the other end. Linda stayed at the edge of the far corner, her eyes bright. She seemed unafraid.

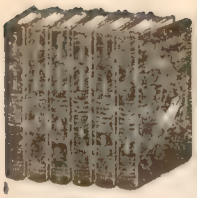
Dave said quietly, "Jenks, you're beginnin' to see, ain't you?"

Seven Dahl was slower than Mark, but both men whirled and tried for their guns at the same time. The Sharps spoke its piece. Seven Dahl's revolver flew away, his arm flopped at his side, and he shrieked with the pain of broken bone and torn flesh.

Old Mose said, "I don't aim t' kill nobody. But ev'body betteh stay put wheah he is."

Lawyer Mark's revolver hung at his side. He saw the long-barreled old gun in Dave's waistband, saw Dave's hand resting comfortably upon it.

The lawyer said, "This is your end, Barr. You can't get away with this. We're too many for you."



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"You *were* too many for me," Dave corrected gently. "Then you made mistakes. You started killin'. It gets to be a habit, that murderin' when a man can't fight back. It's awful easy to kill a man thataway, ain't it, Mark?"

Barr said, "You're crazy as well as a killer, Barr. These men are banded together to fight Eastern—and such as you—" He made another error, and he may have had a fleeting idea it was his last. He said loudly, "Why, among us, we can rule Cactus County—yes, even the State!"

Dave said, "Jenks, you see? You wanta rule anyone. Barclay? Twomey? Any of you riders hankerin' to rule? Who is this come to jedgment, Santa Anna's ghost? Who wants to *rule*?"

The silence was deadly.

Dave said, "Of course we kin all be wrong. I didn't think Eastern Company would hire a man to come up here and doublecross all of us. I believe Mark sold 'em the idea. I believe the telegram sent Mr. Larkin was the opening gun in an attempt to find out what he was doin'. But Eastern did fall fer it and—"

Linda screamed, "Dave! Look out!"

But Dave's cynical little grin was firm on his lips. He had seen the sudden flame in Tom Mark's eyes.

The lawyer had only to lift the gun and shoot. He was a famed target shooter. He jerked his pearl-handled weapon level and fired two shots.

The first one went over Dave Barr's shoulder and just past his left ear. The second went into the air, straight up.

Dave had deliberately taken the old single-action gun from his belt. He had aimed it, shoulder-high, taking all the time in the world. He had fired at the left side of Tom Mark's black coat.

He did not fire a second time. He stood firm as a rock and watched. Tom Mark went down backward, as though kicked by a mule. He flopped over on his side and one foot waggled in protest at this indignity, then was still.

Linda was at his side, holding his hand tight. She said, "I looked. I had to. That was for father. And for Joe Small. He killed them like a skulking Indian, Dave. He was a dirty killer. And I went with him, laughed with him danced with him. . . .

But I never kissed him, Dave. I never kissed him—"

He turned her away, recognizing the ragged edge of hysteria. He took her back of the house, into the barn. There was a buckboard and he made an ado about hooking up a team. He talked to her as lightly as possible, running over the crimes and schemes of Lawyer Mark, dinning it into her even further that he had to be killed, trying to ease her mind.

Jenks came in. He stood for a moment, then said awkwardly, "We bandaged Seven Dahl. He's convinced, Dave."

"That's okay. We all make mistakes. Like I said—" Dave grinned.

Jenks said, "You don't feel we oughter organize? Not even knowin' Eastern hired Mark to cross us?"

Dave said, "Look at it this way. If you was a boss in a company like Eastern and you heard there was a bunch organizin' agin' you—what would you do?"

Jenks said, "Yup. I get it. But will you talk sense to Eastern for us? Kin we organize that much?"

"We can have a Cattleman's Association charter."

Jenks said happily, "I'll tell 'em. Yuh did mighty good, Dave. We're plumb proud of yuh." He bustled out.

Linda said, "Why—they've adopted you. In Mark's place."

He put her in the buckboard. He said, "Go to town and wait. You might tell the preacher. . . . I just want to know one thing. How did you get that message without the sheriff?"

She gathered up the reins and said, "I'll tell the preacher. . . . I'm not scared to say I'll marry you tomorrow, Dave. And I got the wire by stealing the blank. That operator uses a hard pencil and bears down. I took it home and traced it off. I saw it was important and came to find you. . . ." She was small and light, but she seemed very large and important to him then. He kissed her, and she rode away.

He went back to the ranchers. They were waiting for him to tell them what to do. There was a doubtful point to the whole thing, he thought ruefully. He still didn't know if he had walloped them into his way of thinking. . . .

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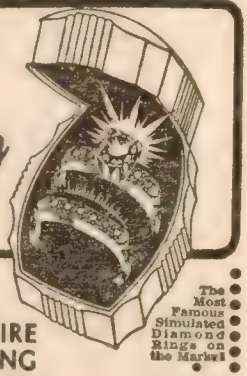

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(Continued from page 77)

spurs, and that Bandy gainin' on him every jump. Until—well, you know where the trail drops about ten foot onto a manzanita flat? That's where I lost sight of Frio. But I could see Bandy, because he stopped his horse where the trail jumps off.

"But Bandy—well, I guess you could say it was somethin' like cockin' a old Peacemaker .45. Nothing spectacular, if you understand me, but plumb positive. He just got down off that Cross Diamond dun, left the dun standin', and slid the Winchester carbine from the saddle boot.

"You've heard folks speak of the *crack* of a rifle? Uh-huh, but this was more of a *crack-a-loo* sound. Because this *was* a rifle, and Frio Shafter was aimin' it. At Bandy Gillis. And Bandy, sky-lighted on the edge of that drop-off, was a plain, hard-to-miss target. Frio Shafter wasn't five yards below him, and right then I didn't know whether Frio had missed or not. For just as I alit from my horse—didn't step; sort of come unfolded—Bandy dove down on Frio Shafter.

"Frio's rifle went *crack-a-loo* again, and I was the he-ro; I stayed where I was and watched. Wasn't much to watch. Bandy, when he drove down like that, sort of folded Frio up like old Casoose's accordion —God save his brown hide!—and when Frio got up from there, Bandy clewed him across the head with the carbine. Laid Frio flat, sort of lulled him to sleep, and about that time I heard a kind of sick coyote voice cryin', 'Ba-a-n-dy! Oh, Ba-a-n-dy, are you hurt?'

"Yeah, you guessed it. There was my own daughter, Sue Bell, come out in a blizzard to see about the young pup. She was on her Spanish pony, that I got her from Chihuahua, and Chris Saddler was with her, on old Possum.

"But it didn't do Chris much good to come along. Because when Bandy came climbin' up from there, Chris said, 'Damn you, Bandy!' And Bandy said, 'There's your horse, Chris.' And by Casoose, if he didn't knock Chris Saddler flat!

"What was that? Bandy? Well, I can learn him a few things, but when he gits broke in good, Bandy's gonna make me a pretty good foreman."

(Continued from page 27)

like a rack of skin and bones, with him bleeding the life out of you." She paused. "You just get that shirt off."

Thad saw the grin widen on Asaph's face. Rhoda's gaze was steady. It was almost as though she pitied him. Confusion pounded at Thad's temples.

"I ain't taking my shirt off in front of any woman," he blurted. "Not unless I'm married to her." His face was crimson.

"Might be a prime time to ask her, after the way she's been frettin' and stewin' about where you been half the night," Asaph drawled. He turned in the doorway and scuffed on outside.

Rhoda had moved closer. She was colored up redder than Thad.

"I won't be talked over that way."

There was something sober in her eyes, but her gaze skidded away. Thad looked at her. She blushed just like she knew all the crazy words that had been pounding in his head. She didn't pull away either when he slipped his arm around her waist.

Her lips were rounded and pouty small as Thad looked down at her. Rhoda had cured Asaph's snake bites fine—and maybe she *could* fix the pleurisy, too. Maybe there was a chance for him to grow big-chested so he could look after her.

"I guess you do know a heap more about cures than us Missouri folk," Thad said.

Thad was one, though, that she might not have learned. Thad tightened his arm as he lowered his head. It was the best backwoods remedy there was. The man that didn't know the cure for a pair of pouty lips just wasn't any kind of man at all.

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(Continued from page 58)

man's hand hit it, he saw the .45 start out, and with his spine and back hair tingling he went for his own gun.

Roy McArdle yelled and threw himself backward. The two guns boomed together. Red's hand felt warm and dry, and the recoil smacked the butt against the heel of his palm in the old, familiar way. He felt Idaho's slug touch the skin of his neck hotly, he heard the waspish roar of it.

He saw his own slug hit Idaho just below the stomach, throwing him backward, loosening that fine, practiced gun-grip. It was too late then to stop his own hand which had caught the recoil and responded automatically—pumping another slug out of the smoking barrel. It hit Idaho in the middle of the chest. The gun fell out of his hand, his arms went limp, and he fell down on his face.

Red's arm began to tremble as he put the gun back in its holster. He took a step or two toward the dead man before his legs threatened to give way. He saw Roy stir, and for the first time he dared look around at Wingy Showalter who had retreated almost to the other sidewalk.

Down the street came a short, portly figure in a blue serge suit, carrying a necktie in his hand. It was Warner S. Pope, seemingly unconscious of the rain that was once again starting to fall.

"I thought I could do it at the last minute, Wingy," Red said. "Idaho *had* to make me draw first. When I wouldn't, it rattled him. He could outshoot me, but I out-thought him. By the time he realized it wouldn't be self-defense, it was too late."

He stumbled past Wingy, heading for the saloon, and met Warner S. Pope in front of it. He caught the banker by the arm. "Just minute, Mr. Pope. This wouldn't have happened if we had a sheriff worth his salt. You've got a lot of responsibility in this town. Why don't you get behind old Wingy, and elect him?"

Pope said, "Eh? How's that? How's that, Ahern?" but Red went on into the saloon. The three men who had been playing cards with him had been watching at the window.

"I guess those markers of yours would have been good, after all," said one.

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And how are you going to send that kid of yours to college, without the folding stuff?

Maybe you think he can work his way through by playing the flute.

If so, you're crazy. (Only three students have ever worked their way through college by playing the flute. And they had to stop eating for four years.)

And how are you going to do that world-traveling you've always wanted to do? Maybe you think you can stoke your way across, or scrub decks. Well, that's no good, I've tried it. It interferes with shipboard romances.

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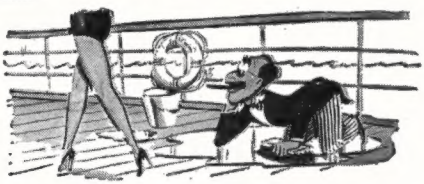

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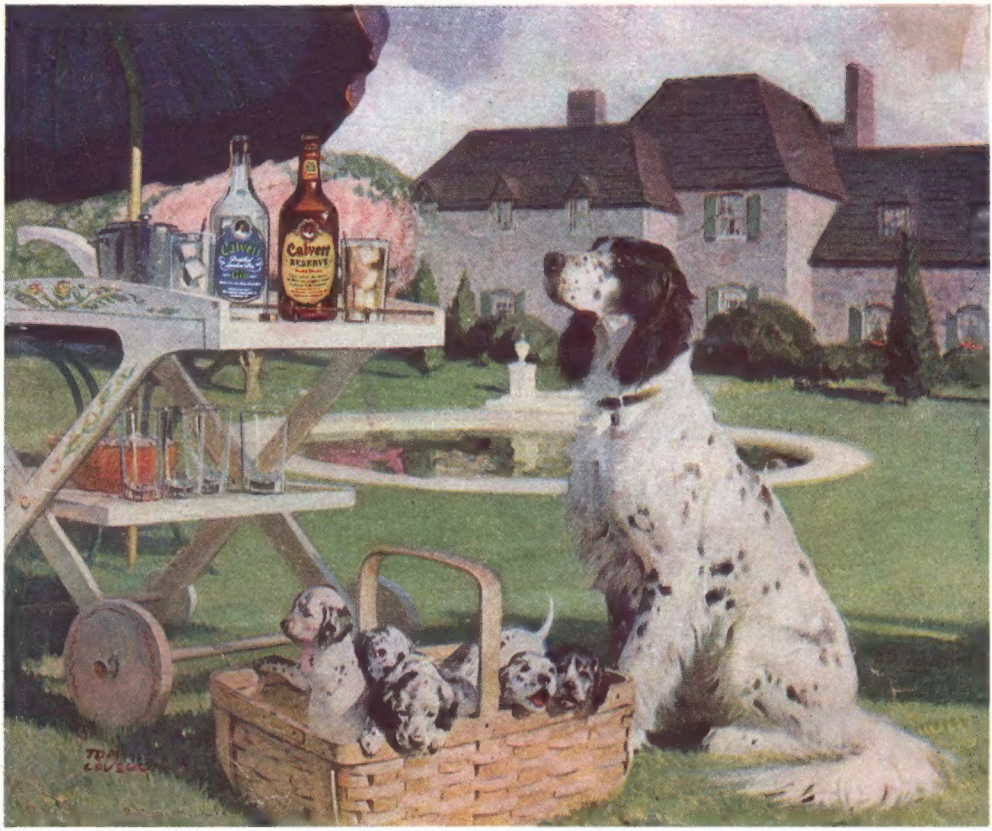

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